



Ben Bright.

THREE CHUMS



Dorothy Dare.



Tom True.

A WEEKLY STORY OF THE ADVENTURES OF TWO BOYS AND A GIRL.

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THREE CHUMS ROBBED;

OR

TRACKING THE STOLEN GRIP.

BY HARRY MOORE.



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THREE CHUMS ROBBED

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CHAPTER I.

THE YOUTH FROM BOSTON.

"He-he-he! Ho-ho-ho!"

Patsy was tickled.

"What's the matter, Patsy?"

"What are you laughing at?"

"Yes, what ails you, anyway?"

"What's tickled your fun so?"

"Out with it, you laughing hyena!" This from Little Punn.

"Phwat's thot! D'yez be afther callin' me a laffin' hyena? Shure, an' it's mesil' w'u'd knock dhe two oyes av yez into wan av yez wur not so litthle, begorra! Don't yez call me out av me name, inny more, ye litthle half-size, ye!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" roared Blues Brown. "Now, will you be good, Punny? Good for you, Patsy! Go for him! Give a to him!"

"Don't get in a sweat, Patsy!" grinned Little Punn. "It n't good for the health. When you cool off, you will catch cold, you know!"

"Dry up, you two!" growled Spalding, the heavy-weight of the crowd. "What were you laughing at, Patsy? Go ahead and tell us, 'e's a good fellow. Don't mind Little Punn."

moind 'im at all, at all! He's not big enuff to moind himsilf, begorra, an' phwy sh'd inny wan ilse moind 'im. Oi' afther axin' yez?"

"I meant pay no attention to him!"

"Go on, Spaldy! It's quality, not quantity that counts, and you know that as well as I do—but go ahead, you cur-pated, freckle-faced son of Erin, and tell them what you were giggling about."

The "Three Chums" Company, made up in the main of pupils of an academy in Bronxton, New York—but which had burned down, throwing them out of school—was making a trip across the continent, giving performances of the great play, "Three Chums," which had been written especially for Ben Bright by his father, a short time before the play-writer's death.

The company had been on the road two months, and had scored successes everywhere it had played—and it had played in a number of cities, too, notably Pittsburg, Pa., Indianapolis, Ind., St. Louis, Mo., and Denver, Colorado, and it was now on a train on the Southern Pacific Railroad, bound for San Francisco, where it had a week's engagement.

The "Three Chums" Company had played at a number of small places, too, in out of the way parts of the country, as the amateur members of the company, from Ben Bright, the manager, down to Little Punn, were desirous of seeing the different portions of the country, and seeing the people, and learning all they could about them. To this end

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the company had played in the moonshine district of Kentucky, the backwoods district of Arkansas, the cowboy district of Texas, the gas belt district of Kansas and the mining district of Colorado.

In addition to playing in those out of the way places, the company had visited places of interest, such as the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, the Grand Canyon of the Colorado in Arizona, and Death Valley in California. In fact, the company was now en route from Death Valley to San Francisco, but as its engagement did not begin until Monday, and this was Friday morning, thus giving it practically four days in which to reach its destination, Ben Bright, the bright, handsome young manager of the company, had decided to stop off and spend a day looking at the wonders of Yosemite Valley, one of the most beautiful sights on the American continent.

The company was now on a train on the Yosemite Valley branch of the Southern Pacific, running from Berenda to Raymond, from which point stages had to be taken to the valley.

But to return to Patsy Dooley, the young Irishman, who was assistant property man.

After giving Little Punn a withering look—which, it is scarcely necessary to say, did not wither—Patsy looked around with a grin, and said:

"Oh, it's dhe funniest t'ing! It bates onnything phwat iver I seen in all me loife!"

"What does, Patsy?" asked Ben.

"Oh, dhe way a young spalpane in dhe car beyant is afther talkin', Oi dunno!"

"Why; how is he talking? What is he talking about?"

"Oh, yez had ought to hear 'im!" Patsy declared. "He's wan av thim—phwat is et yez call thim?—doods! Thot's it! He's a dood. He's all dhe way frum Bosthun, an' he's out here fur dhe purpouse av seein' dhe counthry."

"Well, what is there funny about that, Patsy?" asked Tom True. "That's partly what we're out here for, too."

"Oi know; but it's dhe talk dhe felly do be afther makin' phwat is so funny. Begorra, an' he is scared half to death, but thries to make out thot he is dhe bravest felly phwat iver lived. Sum felly has been fillin' av dhe dood up wid stories about robbers, rood agents an' all thim koint av t'ings, an' dhe poor granehorn b'laves ivery blissid wurrud av it. He's goin' to dhe Yosemite Valley, dhe same as we are, but he is scared in an inch av his loife, fur he t'inks dhe road frum Raymond to dhe valley is lined frum wan ind to dhe other wid rood agents, begorra!"

Patsy paused to laugh, and his hearers, who were beginning to understand, now, were interested.

"What's that, you say, Patsy? A dude from Boston?"

"And going to the Yosemite Valley?"

"And afraid he'll be robbed by road agents?"

"Say, fellows, I'll bet here's a chance for some fun! This from Little Punn.

"Is he alone, Patsy?"

"Yis, dhe spalpane is all alone by himself; phwich is phwy, Oi take it, he is so frightened. He nades a gardeen, begorra!"

"But what does he say that is so funny?" asked Markham.

"Phwat does he say, do yez ax me? Oh, phwat is it he doesn't say! Dhe spalpane has a littlde pisthol no longer than your finger, an' he kapes a-showin' av thot, an' tillin' av phwat he'll do to dhe rood agents av dhey bother him! To hear him talk, yez'd t'ink he wuz dhe bravest felly phwat iver lived!"

"Oh, that's it, is it?"

"A case of whistling to keep up the courage."

"He's trying to convince others that he is brave, and incidentally he is trying to convince himself, as well."

"Oi guiss thot is about dhe trooth av dhe matther!" agreed Patsy. "Shure an' dhe pisthol dhe felly has wouldn't dhraw a blisther at foive paces!"

"It would probably do to shoot frogs with," remarked Homer Sells.

"Dhey'd have to be young frogs, begorra!" grinned Patsy.

"Say, this groweth interesting!" remarked Little Punn, gravely. "I really believe I shall have to go into the next car and make the acquaintance of the young gentleman from Boston!"

Then Little Punn rose to his feet, stretched himself, tilted his hat rakishly over his left ear, and pranced down the aisle, out onto the platform, and through into the next car.

"I pity the Boston youth, now!" murmured Blues Brown.

"His trouble is just about to begin!"

"Yes; Punny will have him scared enough to jump out of the car window inside of fifteen minutes!"

"Punny will make him wish he had never left the city of baked beans and aestheticism!"

"I wouldn't be in that dude's shoes for a million dollars!" declared Spalding.

"Say, let's go in and see the fun, fellows," said Tom True, who was fond of fun. "It will be better than a cirens!"

"So it will! All right; go ahead, Tom."

"Yes, we're with you!"

"Come on," and Tom

and led the way from

the car, Brown, Rhyme, Spalding, Markham, Denny, Patsy, Sawyer, Danforth, Pinky Sweet, Sells, Black and Wheelock following. Ben Bright, Hinkle, the stage manager, and Kerr, the property man, remained in the car with Dorothy Dare, Mamie Blair and Miss Small.

"Why don't you go, too, Ben?" asked Dorothy. "Don't you enjoy fun?"

"Oh, yes," was the smiling reply; "but I enjoy the company of bright, beautiful young ladies more!"

"There you go!" blushing prettily. "It is becoming a habit with him to say pretty things, isn't it!"

"It was very nice of him to say 'young ladies' when he meant 'young lady!'" laughed Mamie.

"And there you go, Mamie!" giving her chum a slap. "You are getting too saucy altogether!"

Meantime Little Punn was making good headway in the car ahead. He had no trouble in locating the youth from Boston, who sat near the centre of the car, surrounded by a little knot of men, who were laughing and poking one another in the ribs. They were having fun with the youth, and Little Punn was sorry he had not got there sooner.

He hastened forward, crowded through the knot of men, plumped himself down in the seat beside the youth from Boston, and extended his hand.

"Hello, old pal!" he said airily. "How are you? Shake!"

The youth, who was not exactly bad-looking, but looked weak and effeminate, and had a bigoted air, stared at Little Punn in astonishment.

"I—I don't know you!" he said.

"Of course not; but you will soon!" breezily. "Say, you're from Boston, aren't you?"

"Yes, but——"

"I knew it! Shake!" and Little Punn seized the youth's hand and shook it heartily. "I knew I could not be mistaken! Why, I can tell a Boston man as far as I can see him, simply by his manner of walking, and I am never fooled, once I see the face of a person from the city of culture and baked beans! There is an air of culture, or maybe agriculture, about the Bostonian that once known, will always be recognized. What is your name?"

The men, sizing Little Punn up for just what he was, looked at each other and winked, and by this time the crowd of youths, Little Punn's friends, were standing where they could take it all in.

As for the Boston youth, the breeziness of the newcomer made him gasp. He was not a dude, as Patsy had called him, though he was well-dressed; he was, however, a youth so overwhelmingly egotistic that he had imagined he knew it all at an early age, had stopped learning, and consequently was now a big old ninny, without being aware

of the fact. His egotism was such that he could not conceive that any one would attempt to make game of him, so he accepted Little Punn seriously, and in reply to the question, "What is your name?" answered:

"Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington."

"Jove, what a mouthful! Well, Augustus and so forth Pennington, I'm glad to know you! My name is A. Little Punn out for a little fun, at your service! I'm awfully glad to make your acquaintance!"

"Well," said the Boston youth, "I can't exactly say the same, Mr. A. Little Punn. Really, I am not in the habit of making acquaintances promiscuously, in this fashion."

"Oh, that's all right," the little chap replied. "I don't mind it, and if I can stand it, you ought to be able to do so. Say, are there many more like you in Boston?"

"Well, I can't say, really," was the reply. "There are a great many wealthy people, there, with brilliant sons, but I don't know that there are any who can quite come up to me in every respect!"

The bystanders laughed, and Little Punn could hardly keep from it. He managed to maintain a sober countenance, however, and said gravely:

"I should judge you are right! I don't think even Boston could produce two such! You are right, Gussie; I know you are right!"

"I think so myself!" complacently. "I have been told so before!"

"I don't doubt that either! By the way, Gussie, where are you bound for?"

"The Yosemite Valley."

"What!" exclaimed Little Punn in pretended surprise. "Why, how fortunate! I'm going to the Yosemite Valley myself, and we can go together, for company and mutual protection. I suppose you've heard about the road agents?"

"Oh, yes; these men have been telling me about them—but I'm not afraid! No, sir! The road agent never lived who could frighten me, Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington! I have a revolver, and I will shoot! Yes, sir, I will shoot!" and the brave youth drew a little twenty-two calibre revolver from his pocket and displayed it with a proud air.

"Is—is it loaded?" asked Little Punn, pretending to be much impressed.

"Of course it's loaded. You don't suppose I'd be carrying an empty revolver around with me, do you?"

"I didn't know but it was like your head—oh, ah! I mean, of course not! You've got a great head!"

"Yes; I've been told that before!"

"I can readily believe it. But, say, Augustus and so forth Pennington, are you sure you know the dangers with which

you will be confronted when you leave civilization and start for the Yosemite Valley through the wilderness?"

"I—I think so."

"You've heard about the road agents, you say."

"Yes."

"Well, do you know what they do with prisoners whom they capture?"

"Ye—es; no, that is——"

"I have been West frequently," warbled Little Punn, "and while I have never been a prisoner in the hands of the road agents, I have known people who were afterward prisoners, and have heard their fate as told by sorrowing relatives. One man, I remember, was hanged head downward over the edge of one of the highest cliffs surrounding the valley! He hung there three days, and was almost dead when pulled up to the top of the cliff!"

"I should have thought he would have been!"

"Right, you are, Gussie, for once! And then there was another poor fellow whom they tied on the back of a wild horse, which was turned loose; he was never heard of afterward. The horse when last seen was going in the direction of South America, by way of the Isthmus of Panama!"

"That was an awful thing to do to a fellow, wasn't it!" shuddered Pennington.

"Yes, but those road agents are terrible fellows. Another fellow I knew, who was captured, was sent up in a balloon. An infernal machine was attached to the balloon, and when it was about a mile high, went off, exploding the gas bag and hurling the man to a horrible death!"

"Is—is that so!" gasped the Boston youth aghast, while the auditors nearly burst with laughter which they did not dare let escape in its entirety.

"I know one 'gasbag' that hasn't burst yet!" gurgled Blues Brown. "Say, fellows, isn't he a corker!"

"A corker! Well, I should remark! He's the biggest and barest-faced liar since the days of Ananias!"

"Oh, Ananias never was in Punny's class! The little runt stands alone, and unapproachable!"

"Another man who was taken prisoner was buried alive, and still another was starved to death, another was tied to the mouth of a cannon and blown into a thousand pieces!"

"Horrible!" gasped the Boston brave boy, beginning to look wild: "but where did they get the cannon?"

"Oh, they have a lot of them!" Little Punn declared, unblushingly. "Why, there is an army of road agents, and armies always have cannons, you know!"

"So they do!" Augustus agreed.

"Oh-h-h!" groaned Brown. "Did you hear that, fellows?"

Wouldn't that paralyze you! And the Bostonian softly swallowed it! Isn't he a guy, though!"

"I didn't know they could produce anything quite so unripe as that, even in Boston!" murmured Markham.

"If Little Punn was to tell him the 'moon made of green cheese' story, he'd swallow it!" declared Spalding.

"Swallow what, the cheese, or the moon?" grinned Rhyme.

"Now you're getting funny!" growled Spalding. "Shut up, and listen to Little Punn."

CHAPTER II.

PLANNING A PRACTICAL JOKE.

"And the road agents are not all," calmly continued Little Punn. "There are other things scarcely less dangerous and dreadful."

"What, for instance?" faltered the youth from Boston, who was, notwithstanding his alleged bravery, beginning to be badly frightened.

"Well, for one thing, there are the bears—great big grizzlies, strong as oxen and more dangerous than tigers. There are thousands of them in the woods along the trail from Raymond to the Yosemite Valley!"

"Why, I—I never dreamed of such a thing!" exclaimed Augustus.

"Can it be that you did not know of this?" murmured Little Punn. "Well, well! How strange it is that people will enter upon an undertaking without first informing themselves of the difficulties and dangers to be encountered! But, then, you are safe, Gussie; you have your trusty revolver, you know!"

"Ye-es, so I have," the youth assented, hesitatingly; "my revolver is all right to kill road agents with, but I don't know so well about grizzly bears!"

"Oh, it'll fetch 'em, all right!" declared Little Punn. "But there are other things, such as panthers, leopards and mountain lions. Why, the mountain lions are almost if not quite as bad as the real lions of Africa and India! They have been known to kill and carry off a full-grown steer weighing twelve or fourteen hundred pounds!"

"Goodness! And I never heard a thing about those animals!" the youth quavered. "The guide-books don't say anything about them."

"Of course not. The makers of the guide-books are trying to encourage the tourist business, not discourage it, so they are careful not to say anything about the road agents."

bears, panthers, mountain lions, snakes, centipedes, tarantulas, alligators, sea serpents and the thousand and one other things that are lying in wait with mouths spread, ready to gobble up stray tourists! The guide-book people are onto their jobs, all right!"

"Sea serpents, did you say!" gasped the Boston youth. "Why, how could there be sea serpents? I thought they stayed in the ocean!"

"Oh, they do, as a rule, but they often come inland a hundred miles or so in search of novelties in the way of food. They get tired of jellyfish as a steady diet, and pine for a taste of tourist!"

The men who had been jollyng the Boston youth before Little Punn's advent were forced to admit to themselves that as liars they were in the kindergarten department, were as novices compared to this brassy youth, and they had kept silent; but they were enjoying themselves hugely, and if laughing is healthy they should have laid in a supply of health that would last them a year. The trouble was that, in order to keep from giving Little Punn away and spoiling the fun they had to laugh silently, and when they felt that they must give vent to audible laughter, they would retire to the end of the car.

The Boston youth was plainly worried. He had kept up a bold front when the men were talking to him about the road agents, and had told what he would do, but Little Punn had proven too much for him, and after the statement regarding the sea serpents he was evidently very ill at ease.

"And then there are the Indians!" cried Little Punn, cheerfully. "I had forgotten them. There are hundreds of fierce red Indians roaming through the woods, each and every one armed with a Gatling gun, double-edged sword, bowie knife, accordion and volume of spring poetry!"

"What!" gasped Augustus Fitz-Percy; "I thought there were no more wild Indians!"

"That's all a fairy tale gotten up by immigration companies to keep people from staying away from this part of the country! There are hundreds of Indians in the mountain fastnesses of this and other Western states, and scores of people are killed by them every year!"

"But—but surely they are not armed with Gatling guns!"

"Indeed they are! The Indians are *fin de siècle*, Gussie! They are up to date, and I tell you you are taking your life in your hands by venturing to make a visit to the Yosemite Valley!"

Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington looked as if he realized this fact, but after all there was a small streak of courage in his make-up, and after thinking the matter over for a few moments he turned to Little Punn and asked:

"Did you say you are going to the Yosemite Valley?"

"Yes," assented Little Punn; "I'm going to make the attempt, at least. I cannot say that I will ever reach there."

"Well," the Boston youth said, presently, "if you can risk it, I can. I'm going to make the attempt, anyway!"

"Good for you!" cried Little Punn, seizing the youth's hand and shaking it warmly. "You are the right sort, Gussie, old boy! You are just what I knew you were the moment I laid my eyes on you, a youth who knows not the name of fear—a youth who is as brave as a lion! I am glad I met you, Gussie! Now, with your kind permission, I will accompany you, and the two of us together ought to be able to make it warm for the road agents, bears, mountain lions, snakes, sea serpents—in fact, anything and everything that dares to tackle us!"

"I shall be pleased to have your company," said Augustus, with kindly condescension. "In an encounter, two could make a better fight than one."

"Yes, indeed! Well, I'll go back in the other car and get my grip, Gussie. You stay right here. I'll be back soon. So long. Be careful, and don't shoot yourself with that revolver!"

Then Little Punn left the car, Tom True and the others having at a signal from the little chap, gone out just ahead of him.

"Now, fellows," Little Punn said, as soon as all had returned to their seats in the other car; "I have a scheme. If you are in for it, we can have some fun!"

"With the Boston youth?" asked Tom True.

"Yes. Say, but he's a bird! He's the worst jay I ever run against in all my life! Believes any old thing you tell him; is scared to death, but pretends he is the bravest of the brave, and all that, you know! Oh, we can have a huckleberry picnic with that fellow, if you'll go into it with me!"

"Well, what's your scheme, Punny?"

"Yes, tell us."

"Maybe we'll go into the thing!"

"We can tell better after you tell us what your scheme is."

"Yes; give us the scheme."

"All right; I'll do it. You know what Patsy said about how this youth was threatening what he would do to the road agents?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

"Sure!"

"Correct; go on."

"And you know what yourselves heard him say."

"Yes."

"We know."

"Yes, and we know what we heard you say, too, Punny!" said Spalding.

"That is, we remember part of it," assented Brown. "It would be impossible to remember all of it, Spalding."

"So it would; but go on, Punny."

"All right. Well, my plan is this: I will go back in the car yonder, and stay with Pennington. When we get to Raymond, I will manage to delay him in some manner until after you folks have started to the valley. Then we will come on behind you in a spring wagon, or something of that kind. When you reach the Wawona Hotel, the halfway house, all you who are in the joke come back up the trail, waylay us, pretend you are road agents, and relieve Augustus of his money and valuables."

"Yes, but see here," said Tom True. "He is going to the valley the same as we are, and he will recognize us, and he might have us arrested and charged with highway robbery when we return to Raymond."

"Oh, there is no danger of that. Put on a different coat and hat from what you will wear later in the valley, and 'make-up' your faces a little like you do when you go on the stage. He will be so badly frightened that he would never know you again if he saw you a hundred times."

"Yes, but how about his money and valuables? We won't keep them, of course. How will you get them back to him?"

"Make a package of them, and leave it at the Wawona Hotel. I'll see that he gets it, all right."

The youths looked at one another, and finally Spalding said:

"I'm in for it! That guy in there is so egotistic that he ought to be given a good scare!"

"That's right. It may do him good!"

"Sure! I'm in for doing it!"

"And me!"

"I'll be in the game, if I lose!"

"Count on me!"

The majority of the youths expressed their willingness to engage in Little Punn's scheme, and then Tom True turned to Ben Bright.

"What do you say, Ben? Will you go in with us?" he asked.

Ben shook his head.

"No, I prefer not to do so, Tom," Ben replied. "To tell the truth, I do not approve of practical jokes. You boys do not need to be influenced by my ideas on the subject, however. You have a right to go ahead and do as you wish. I would suggest, however, that you be very careful, if you go ahead with this affair, to neither hurt anybody nor get hurt yourselves."

"Oh, we'll be careful, Ben!" said Tom. "We won't have anything but blank in the revolvers."

"I know; but this young man you speak of—he has a revolver and it is loaded with bullets. He might kill, or hurt some of you boys badly."

"No danger, Ben!" laughed Little Punn. "It's a little twenty-two, and wouldn't hurt a flea! Besides, he'll be too badly frightened to try to use it. You need not fear on that score."

"Oh, I don't think there is much danger to be apprehended from that source," smiled Ben. "Still, it is best, always, to be careful."

"Say, Ben, you should have heard the stories Punny told the Boston youth!" smiled Markham. "Munchausen is not in it at all alongside of Little Punn. I never heard anything to equal it, and never expect to again!"

"Not until Punny gets started on another such streak," said Brown.

"What did he tell him?" asked Ben.

"Goodness only knows what all he told the youth. First, he went to work and told him a half dozen different things that road agents had been known to do to prisoners, one of the stories being that the prisoner was sent up in a balloon, and when a mile or so high, an infernal machine went off, tearing the balloon to pieces and dropping the prisoner to a horrible death!"

"Oh, Punny!" said Ben, in mock sorrow. "How could you!"

"Easy enough!" the little chap replied.

"Another story was that a prisoner was tied to the mouth of a cannon and blown into a thousand pieces; and when the Boston youth wanted to know where they got the cannon, Punny said there was an army of road agents, and that armies always had cannons!"

Ben roared at this, and the girls had to laugh, much to Little Punn's secret gratification.

"Well, you are certainly at the top in your line, Punny!" said Ben. "And did this youth believe all that you told him?"

"I guess he did," grinned the little chap.

"Oh, he drank it down as if he liked it!" said Tom True.

"Well, he must be a likely specimen!" said Ben.

"Not a very good one for cultured Boston to send out. I should say," from Dorothy.

"What ails the fellow, anyway?" asked Hinkle.

"Swell head!" said Little Punn, sententiously. "He thought he had learned it all when he was ten years old, and hasn't accumulated any knowledge since."

"Maybe a good scare will do him good," suggested Kert.

"We'll find out whether it will or not before the day is gone!" said Tom True.

"We will that!"

"Sure!"

"We'll take some of the conceit out of him, and make room for some knowledge."

"That's what we'll do!"

"Well, don't forget to do you part, fellows," said Little Punn. "I'll do mine."

"You may be sure we will not forget, Punny," said Tom True. "We'll do the work up according to Hoyle."

"And don't you forget it!"

"Rest easy, Punny. We'll scare that friend of yours out of several years' growth!"

"He'll never grow another inch after to-day!"

"He'll have some wonderful stories to tell when he gets back to Boston!"

"I should say so!"

"But he will never be able to come up to Punny as a story teller!"

"Not if he lived to be as old as Methusaleh!"

"That's all right," grinned Little Punn. "I may be able to tell some pretty tall stories, but I don't think I shall ever see the day when I will be a match for Blues Brown."

"Go along!" said Brown. "You have a cinch on the championship belt! Even the ordinary campaign speaker is not in it with you! As for myself—I am a tyro, a mere novice by comparison!"

"After hearing Punny, to-day, I shall have to give him my vote!" said Markham. "I was in doubt for awhile, and hardly knew who was entitled to the belt, but I know now."

"I think you are right, Markham," said Spalding. "Brown's star has set; he isn't in it with Punny!"

"Thanks!" said Little Punn airily, doffing his hat, and bowing low. "I am glad Brownie recognizes and is willing to acknowledge his inferiority to me in one respect at least."

"Oh, you outclass him so greatly that it would be useless for him to try to set up any claim, Punny!" said Spalding.

"Well, I'm going to rejoin my friend in the other car," said Little Punn. "If you run across me after we get off the train at Raymond, don't recognize me."

"Oh, we won't!"

"No, indeed. We're glad of the chance not to, Punny!"

"We'll give you the marble-heart stare, old man!"

"We'll cut you cold!"

"We won't speak as we pass by!"

"That'll be all right, Punny; but say!"

"What?"

"Don't scare that youth so badly that he will be afraid to make the trip to the valley."

"That's right; go easy, Punny. You may frighten him clear off the track."

"Punny's enough to frighten a train off the track, anyway!" This from Brown.

"There is at least one other—namely, Brownie!" grinned Little Punn. "Well, so long, fellows; I'll see you later," and picking up his grip, he left the car, and went into the one in which the Boston youth was seated.

"Ah, you are back again, eh?" remarked Pennington, as Little Punn took the seat beside him.

"Yep, I'm here," said Little Punn. "How are you feeling? Do you still feel that you are willing to risk capture or death at the hands of road agents, or death by an encounter with bears, panthers, mountain lions, alligators or sea serpents?"

"Yes," replied the Boston youth, with a dogged air; "I'm not afraid of any of the things you have mentioned! I have my revolver, and if worst comes to worst, I can and will use it!"

This was said with a high tragedy air that was amusing, but Little Punn kept a straight face, and patting his companion on the shoulder said approvingly:

"Good boy! You're as brave as a lion! I knew you were the stuff, all right!"

CHAPTER III.

THE "HOLD UP."

The train reached Raymond at seven o'clock, and leaving the company at the hotel, Ben went to the office of the Yosemite Valley Stage Co., and engaged round trip passage for all the members of his company.

The regular fare for one person, including the cost of meals and hotel accommodations while at the valley, was forty-six dollars, but on account of there being so many in the party, a straight rate of thirty-two dollars each was made.

It transpired that the company had only two coaches in service at this time of the year, and as Ben's party would entirely fill these, the only chance for Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington and Little Punn to get to the valley was by hiring a private conveyance, which was just what the last named youth desired.

The members of Ben's party had just time to eat break-

fast before the coaches drove up in front of the hotel, and then, getting in, were soon en route for the Yosemite Valley.

Onward rolled the coaches. It was a beautiful day, not being cold, but just bracing. At about noon, when the drivers halted a few minutes to water the horses at a mountain stream, Tom True and Markham each got up on the seat beside a driver.

"How much farther is it to the hotel?" asked Tom, after the stream was crossed, and they were once more under way.

"'Bout nine miles, young feller," was the reply. "We'll git thar at two o'clock."

"We take dinner there?"

"Yep."

Tom said no more at that time, but kept account of the time by referring to his watch at intervals, and when it lacked twenty minutes of two, he said:

"Will you please tell me when we are a mile from the hotel?"

"Shore!" was the reply. Then the driver pointed ahead with his whip.

"D'yer see yender whur ther trail seems ter run smack ag'in ther rock wall uv ther mounting?" he asked.

"Yes, I see it," replied Tom.

"Waal, thet is jes' erbout er mile frum ther hotel. The trail turns sharp ter ther left thar, w'ich is w'y et looks ez ef et run smack ag'in ther rocks."

"I suppose the trail on to the hotel is plain?"

"Plain? Ez a-b-c, young feller. Waal, jes' like et is hyar. This is ther on'y trail in these parts, young feller."

"So I judged. Well, I am going to ask a favor, driver. When you get to the turn, yonder, stop. A lot of us young fellows want to get out and walk the rest of the way to the hotel. It is terribly cramped inside the coach. Will you stop?"

"Uv course. I don't blame yer fur wantin' ter git out an' stretch yer laigs. Et'll do yer good."

"I think so; then we will get a better view of the scenery."

The driver looked at Tom and slowly winked one eye.

"D'yer know, sonny," he said: "this hyar scenery is er moughty nice thing—fur ther railroad, stage lines an' hotels!"

"I guess you are right," laughed Tom. "Still, to people who have the money to spare, it is certainly worth the price to get to see this scenery."

"Oh, yaas; ther scenery's all right," was the reply. "But er feller wot's got cunny git up kin take er rifle, er fryin' pan on er blanket and tramp an' hunt his way in ter ther

valley an' out agin' in six er eight days, hev sead uv fun. git healthy an' stout, an' not pay out three dollars, whar this way et costs 'im forty-six."

"True," said Tom. "That would be rare sport for a gang of boys, but you see we have three ladies with us, and they could not walk it."

"Thet's so. Waal, hyar we air at ther turn. Et's jes' er mile frum hyar ter ther hotel."

"All right; we'll get out here, driver."

The drivers of both coaches brought the horses to a stop, for Markham had had just such a talk with the other driver as Tom had had with this one, and all the members of the company, with the exception of Ben Bright, Hinkle, Kerr and the three ladies, got out of the coaches.

Several of the boys had grips, and this was noticed by the drivers.

"W'y don't ye leeve ther grips in ther coaches?"

"Oh, we want them with us, driver," said Blues Brown with a portentous wink which meant nothing, but which the driver evidently thought he understood, for he said, "Oh, yaas; uv course!"

"All right; drive ahead," said Tom True, and away rolled the coach, the youths waving their hands at the inmates, whose faces were at the windows.

It happened that the trail made another turn a short distance ahead, and as soon as the coaches had disappeared around this bend the youths hastened in among the trees at the side of the trail, and by the aid of crayon, paints and stage make-ups, managed to so alter their looks that any one seeing them thus could not possibly recognize them after the make-up was removed. They changed hats and coats, also, which further changed their appearance.

"Now we are ready to welcome the young gentleman from Eoston!" said Tom True, when their work was finished. "I hope they will be along soon."

"So do I!"

"Here, too!"

"I do, you bet; for I am hungry."

"So am I!"

"I could eat one of those bears Punny told Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington about!"

"So could I."

"Well, see here, fellows," said Tom; "we want this thing understood beforehand. We must each of us understand what we are to do, so as not to get mixed up."

"That's right. Well, you are the boss, Tom. Tell us what we are to do."

"Oh, I'm no more the boss' than any of the rest of you," demurred Tom.

"Well, go ahead and lay out the work for each of us, any way."

"Yes, do so, Tom."

"That's right."

"And hurry; the wagon may come at any moment."

"That's right. Hurry, Tom?"

"All right. How many have revolvers?"

"I have!"

"And I!"

"I've got a gun."

"So have I."

The four were Spalding, Markham, Brown and Sells.

"I, too, have one," said Tom. "Now, I think it will be a good plan for Rhyme and myself to catch the horses by the bits and stop them; you, Spalding, will go up to the Boston youth and force him to fork over, while the rest can scatter out, fan shape, and surround the wagon. Is that all right?"

"Of course!"

"Sure!"

"That's just the cheese!"

"You bet!"

"We'll do the trick!"

"And scare that Boston blowhard into conniption fits!"

"We will that!"

"Hark!" exclaimed Tom True.

All listened eagerly for a few moments, and then Tom said:

"I hear the rattle of wheels!"

"So do I!"

"And I!"

"Yes; they're coming!"

"They're just around the turn!" said Tom. "Steady, now; wait till they are almost even with us, and then make the rush. I'll give a low whistle, and all leap out at the same instant."

"All right!"

"We'll do it!"

"You bet!"

"We'll make that young fellow think there is an army of road agents, sure enough!"

"That's no lie!"

"Sh!" cautioned Tom. "Silence, now; they're almost at the turn!"

The rattle of the vehicle sounded close at hand, now, and perhaps half a minute later a team of horses attached to a strongly-made spring wagon appeared in sight. On the front seat was the driver, a man of forty to forty-five years, and beside him sat Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington, the

youth from Boston, while in another seat behind the two sat Little Punn.

Evidently Little Punn was expecting something would happen soon, for he was casting quick, searching glances here and there, apparently watching for some sign of his friends.

It was evident that the driver and the youth beside him were expecting no trouble, however, for they were conversing and paying no attention to their surroundings.

On came the vehicle, and when it lacked still thirty or forty feet of being even with the hiding-place of the party, Tom True gave vent to a low, but sharp whistle, and with a shout the youths leaped from cover and rushed forward. As he had outlined in advance, Tom and Rhyme each seized the bit of a horse, and brought them to a standstill, while Tom covered the youth on the front seat with the revolver in his free hand, the other youths who had revolvers doing the same.

"Road agents!" shrieked Little Punn, as the youths appeared. "We shall be murdered! Up with your hands, Gussie, or you are a dead boy!" and he set the example by elevating his own hands.

But at the supreme moment, the Boston youth proved himself possessed of some courage, for he drew the little twenty-two revolver, but before he could use it, if indeed he could have done so, his hands trembling so he could scarcely hold the weapon, Spalding leaped forward and seized Pennington by the wrists.

"You will have to hand over your money and valuables, or eat lead, young fellow!" cried Tom True in his fiercest tone, though scarcely able to keep from laughing outright. "We are road agents of the worst sort!"

"W—hat d—does this m—mean!" stuttered Augustus. "Y—you m—mustn't d—do t—this! I—it i—is an ou—outrage!"

"Shut up, or I will put a bullet through you, dudy!" cried Tom, very fiercely indeed. "This is your time to keep still!"

"Don't say anything to make 'em mad!" cried Little Punn in pretended terror. "They'll kill us, if you do!"

"Thet's right," the driver coincided. "Yer'd better do ez they tells yer, young feller! I didn't know thar wuz enny road agents in Californy, but ez thar air, yer hed better take et ez eezy ez yer know how!"

"That is good advice, sir," said Tom; "and if the young fellow has any sense at all, he will take it. Give up your revolver, if you know when you are well off!"

Markham stepped forward and took the revolver out of the nerveless hand of the youth from Boston, and then Spalding let go of his wrists.

"Now shell out!" cried Tom, fiercely. "You, too!" to Little Punn. "Hand over your money, watches and other valuables, and do it quickly!"

"All right—all right!" cried Little Punn. "Here are my money and valuables, sirs! Take them, and welcome, but please don't hurt us! We are innocent, law-abiding citizens, and never did anybody any harm! Please don't hurt us!"

"Here are my money and valuables, too!" quavered Augustus, handing the articles out with nervous fingers. "Y—you aren't going to take us prisoners, are y—you?"

"Not if you don't get fresh," replied Tom; "and if you will agree to do exactly as we tell you."

"Oh, we'll agree to do as you tell us!" quavered the Boston youth. "We'll do anything, if you only won't take us prisoners!"

"Shall we take the grip, captain?" asked Patsy, who had clambered into the wagon, and was holding up the Boston youth's grip for Tom's inspection.

"What is in the grip?" asked Tom severely.

"Clothing, kind sir; nothing but clothing, I assure you!" the youth hastened to reply. "If you do not believe me, I will show you. I——"

"That is all right. Leave the grip," This to Patsy. "We don't need any clothing."

Then Tom eyed Pennington sternly for a few moments, and said:

"Are you sure you have given up all your money and valuables?"

"Y—yes, sir! Quite sure, sir! If you wish, y—you c—can search me."

"You swear it?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Very good! And you?" to Little Punn.

"I have given up everything," he declared.

"Very well. Now, then, sir," turning to Pennington; "I am going to tell you what you will have to do. If you refuse to do it, we shall be under the necessity of making you our prisoner!"

"Go on, sir!" quavered the now thoroughly frightened and completely cowed youth. "We'll do just as you say. What is it you wish us to do?"

"I will tell you," sternly, "you must agree to remain here, right where you are, for half an hour before stirring. Will you do it?"

"Y—yes, sir!" brightening up. This was going to be easy to do, and the youth had feared something terrible was to be asked of them.

"You promise, then?"

"Y—yes, sir!"

"And you'll keep your promise?"

"Y—yes, sir!"

"You swear it?"

"Y—yes, sir!"

"Yes—what?"

"Y—yes, I swear it, sir!"

"All right. See that you do as you have promised."

"But how are we to know when the half hour is up?" asked Little Punn. "You have our watches."

"The driver has a timepiece," said Tom. "What time is it by your watch, driver?"

The man drew forth an old-fashioned watch and glanced at it.

"Et's now ten minnets uv two, sir," he replied.

"Very good. When it is twenty minutes past two by your watch, you may drive on. But don't you start a minute sooner, as I shall leave one of my men on guard, and if you try the trick he will shoot every one of you dead! Do you understand?"

"Y—yes, sir!" faltered Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington.

"We do!" declared Little Punn. "If the wagon starts sooner, it'll have to go without me, you bet!" and he leaped to the ground. "I'm going to stand right here till the half hour is up!"

"Oh, I shan't turn er wheel till ther time is up!" the driver declared.

"Very well; see that you don't! Come, men!" and then Tom and the rest hurried back into the timber at the side of the road, and seizing their grips, made a detour, keeping among the trees until they had rounded the next turn in the trail, and then they came out upon the trail, and paused a few moments while Tom took a look to see whether Augustus and the driver of the wagon had obeyed orders or not.

"They're rooted to the spot!" he announced when he rejoined the others.

"I'll bet they're hardly breathing!" laughed Markham.

"Say, but didn't that Boston youth look wild, though!"

"He surely did!"

"He thought his time had come!"

"Yes; he thought he was to be made a prisoner and treated in some such manner as Little Punn had told him of!"

"That's right. He looked relieved when he found different."

"I don't think there is any danger of them starting before the half hour is up," said Tom: "so if we run across any water, we had better stop and wash the paint off."

"That's right. I guess we'll find water between here and the hotel."

And they did. A few rods farther on they came to a stream which crossed the trail, and they quickly washed the make-up off their faces. Then they doffed the coats and hats, returned them to the grips, and donned the hats and coats they had worn before.

"Now, then," said Tom, "the question is, what shall we do with that fellow's and Little Punn's money and jewelry? We won't dare leave them with the hotel clerk, as that would be a dead give away."

"So it would!"

"That's right!"

"Sure! What will we do with them?"

"We must get them back to their owners; but how is it to be accomplished, that's the question?"

The youths looked at each other blankly.

"I'll tell you what we can do," said Markham presently.

"What?" asked Tom.

"This: Tie the things up in two packages, label them, 'For the two youths in the spring wagon,' and just as we are leaving the hotel, drop them on the porch, and call the clerk's attention to them, as if we had discovered them there."

"That's a good scheme!" cried Tom. "We'll do that very thing! The packages will be small, and we can keep them in our pockets till just as we are leaving!"

"So we can!"

"That's right!"

"Of course!"

"The very scheme!"

CHAPTER IV.

LITTLE PUNN AND THE BOSTON YOUTH PART.

"Who has some paper?" asked Tom.

"I have," replied Markham, opening his grip. Then he handed Tom some wrapping paper, taking it from around some new shirts which he had purchased in Denver, and had had no occasion to wear as yet. There was string, too, in plenty, and the two packages were soon made up and duly labeled, and the party set out down the trail at a rapid walk.

"We have been only five minutes doing this," said Tom. "We ought to reach the hotel in ten minutes more, eat dinner in fifteen minutes, and be away at least ten minutes before Augustus, Little Punn and the driver get there."

"We can do it, easy enough!" declared Spalding.

"So we can!"

"Of course!"

"Well, put your best foot foremost, fellows!" said Tom, and taking the lead, he set them a merry pace.

"Phew!" whistled Pinky Sweet, after five minutes of the swift walking. "You fellows are certainly making it warm for me!"

"I'll wager you're no warmer than I am!" grunted Spalding, whose large size and heavy weight made walking a task. "I'm blowing like a porpoise. Say, Tom, can't you ease up a bit? I think we have plenty of time."

"I guess so," with a smile. "We are not far from the hotel, now. See! Yonder it is!" and he pointed ahead to where, sure enough, the outlines of a building could be seen through between the trees.

The speed was slackened considerably, and five minutes later they reached the hotel, where they were greeted by the other members of the party.

"We began to think you had got lost!" smiled Dorothy Dare.

"Yes; we were about to start on and leave you," said Mamie Blair.

"Hurry, boys!" said Ben. "The driver says we can barely reach the valley by dark, ordinarily, and if we lose much more time night will catch us with some of the most dangerous portions of the road to traverse."

"We'll be ready in a jiffy, Ben!" said Tom, and he and his companions made a rush for the dining-room, where they bolted a meal in just twelve minutes.

As they stepped out of the hotel onto the porch, Tom and Markham, who had the two packages containing the money and jewelry belonging to Augustus Pennington and Little Punn, dropped the packages on the porch close to the door. Then Tom pretended to discover the packages.

"See here, sir," he called to the hotel clerk. "Here are a couple of packages. I wonder who they belong to?"

The clerk came out of the office, and picking the packages up, read the inscription. "For the young men in the spring wagon," he read aloud. "Why, what can that mean?" looking at the youths wonderingly. "There is no spring wagon here. Perhaps they are meant for some of you gentlemen."

"I think not," said Tom, shaking his head. "They must be meant for some other young men."

"Yender cums er spring waggin'," said one of the stage-drivers at this moment. "Mebby ther packidges air fur them fellers, whoever they air!"

"Just as likely as not," assented the clerk. "But, I wonder who could have placed these packages here?"

"They were not on the porch when we went in to dinner," said Tom, truthfully; "someone must have placed them here after that," which was true, also.

"You can soon find out whether the packages belong to anybody in the spring wagon, or not," said Billy Sawyer. "They'll be here in a minute."

All were so interested in the arrival of the wagon that no move was made by Ben's company to enter the coaches and renew the journey to the valley. By unanimous though unspoken consent all stood watching the coming vehicle and waiting for its arrival.

The wagon was less than a quarter of a mile distant, and the driver could be seen lashing the horses, which were coming at a gallop.

"They seem in an awful hurry!" said Markham.

"They do that!" assented Tom True.

"That fellow is drivin' ez ef ther Ole Nick wuz arter 'im!" remarked one of the stagedrivers.

"Maybe they are trying to see how fast time they can make between Raymond and the valley!" suggested Brown.

"Likely that's it," coincided Rhyme. "They are trying to establish a record."

Ben, Hinkle, Kerr and the three girls, Dorothy, Mamie, and Miss Small, were standing in the background, and, understanding the situation, exchanged smiles of amusement.

The vehicle was almost there, now, and Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington and Little Punn could be seen hanging to the seats with one hand while holding to their hats with the other.

Then the wagon came to stop in front of the hotel so suddenly that Augustus was thrown out of the seat and across the dashboard upon his stomach, while Little Punn slid off the rear seat down underneath the front one.

"We've been robbed!" cried Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington, wildly, as he scrambled to his feet.

"Yes, we've been robbed!" howled Little Punn, also struggling to his feet, and striking an attitude.

"What!"

"Yer don't say!"

"Robbed? It can't be possible!"

"Yer jes' a-foolin'!"

"It can't be true! You're only jollying!"

"Robbed! When?"

"And where?"

"Yes, and by whom?"

"By the road agents, of course!" cried the Boston youth, greatly excited. "And right up the road, here, a mile or so!"

"Yes, by the road agents, of course!" howled Little Punn, seeing the Boston youth's excitement, and going it one bet-

ter. "We've been robbed and murdered, and—no, I mean just robbed! But a fellow might as well be murdered as frightened to death, like my friend, here!"

"Speak for yourself!" snapped the Boston youth, his courage returning now in the presence of so many people. "I was not frightened—not in the least!"

"Oh, no! You were not frightened—not any!" said Little Punn, sarcastically. "You were scared so bad the trembling of your body made the wagon rattle, and you'd have tumbled out in a limp heap if I hadn't held you in!"

"'Tis false!" howled Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington, in a rage, and he shook his fist in Little Punn's face.

"'Tis true!" howled Little Punn, shaking his fist under the Boston youth's nose, and they would probably have fought then and there, had not the driver pushed their arms aside and told them to shut up.

"Yer wuz both scart half ter death!" he said. "Et's er case uv ther pot a-callin' ther kittle black! Et's nuthin' ter be ershamed uv. I wuz sum scart, meself!"

"But I do not propose to allow any common person like that to call me a coward!" growled Augustus, glaring as fiercely as he was able at Little Punn.

"And I don't propose to allow any Boston bean-eating dude to call me a liar!" cried Little Punn, returning the other's look with interest. "You were afraid, and you know it!"

"I wasn't!"

"You were!"

"I wasn't!"

"I tell you, you were!"

"Hyar! Hyar! Ef yer agoin' ter fight, git down outen my waggin'!" the driver cried.

"All right!" cheerfully answered Little Punn, leaping to the ground at a bound, and putting up his fists threateningly at the Boston youth. "Come down out of there, Gussie, and I'll give you the worst licking you ever had in your life! Come down, do!" and the little rascal, who was pretending anger, pranced wildly about and shook his fists at the youth in the wagon, while the spectators roared with laughter. It was such an utterly ridiculous scene that they could not help it.

"Great Scott! Who'd have thought Punny could be so warlike!" said Markham in an undertone.

"He's only pretending!" grinned Brown. "He's making a grand stand bluff!"

The bluff worked all right, too, for a change suddenly came over Augustus Fitz-Percy. His anger disappeared as if by magic, and an air of haughty disdain took its place.

"I shall do nothing of the kind!" he replied, in re-

sponse to Little Punn's invitation to come down. "I would not lower myself by fighting with a common person like yourself!"

"Well, I wouldn't advise you to do it!" grinned Little Punn. "You show rare good judgment in everything save the assertion that I am a 'common person.' I assure you, Gussie, old socks, that I am a most uncommon sort of person! There's nothing common about me! I'm an original character, Gussie, and am strictly up to date. You'd acknowledge the fact, too, if you knew as much about me as you ought to!"

"You are insolent!" said Augustus, with an attempt at dignity. "I will say that you shall not ride any further in my wagon! Your company is no longer pleasing to me!"

"Oh, isn't it?" sneered Little Punn. "Well, I can tell you that it nearly made me sick to have to ride in the wagon with you, and I'm glad to quit you! I'll ride in the regular coach with these other people."

This, as Ben had shrewdly suspected, was what Little Punn was working for. He had made the Boston youth angry on purpose, so as to have an excuse to leave him, and get back among his friends, and it had worked like a charm.

"See here, you two young fellows," said the clerk at this juncture; "here are a couple of packages that were found on the porch, here, a few minutes ago. They are inscribed, 'For the two young men in the spring wagon.' Will you look and see if the contents belong to you?"

"Let me see!" cried Augustus Pennington, and the clerk passed him up a package, handing the other to Little Punn.

The youths tore the packages open, and as they did so a cry of surprise escaped the Boston youth. Little Punn, of course, knew what the contents of the packages were, but he pretended to be surprised, and uttered an exclamation the same as Augustus had done.

"Wh—why!" the latter cried; "it's my money, watch and jewelry!"

"And here's my money, watch and jewelry!" exclaimed Little Punn.

"What?" cried the clerk. "You don't mean to say that those are what the road agents took from you!"

"We do mean that very thing!" declared Augustus.

"We don't mean anything else!" from Little Punn.

"Well," gasped the clerk, "this is the strangest thing I ever heard of! In the first place, this is the first instance of highway robbery I have heard of in this part of the country in years, and then to have the robbers return their booty in the most remarkable feature of all! I do not understand it. How many of the road agents were there, and what sort of looking fellows?"

"Oh, there were fifteen or twenty!" the Boston youth cried. "And they were fierce, desperate-looking ruffians, too! I made an attempt to stand them off with my revolver, but they outnumbered me so greatly, I was forced to yield!"

"Was that the revolver you used?" asked Blues Brown, innocently, pointing at the little twenty-two, which had been included in the package, and was showing among the other articles.

"N—no; y—yes, that is it!" Augustus replied, flushing slightly, for he was beginning to suspect that his armament was not as awe-inspiring as it might be.

"Haw-haw-haw!" roared one of the stagedrivers. "No wonder yer couldn't stan' 'em off, sonny! Thet thar weepin mought do ter shoot bullfrogs with, but et wouldn't skeer road agents—none w'atever!"

"That, I would have you to understand, sir, is a superior weapon!" the youth declared pompously.

"Yes—sooperior ter er popgun!" with another hoarse guffaw.

"Wot is thar sooperior erbout et, sonny?" asked the other driver. "Not et's size, shorely!"

"N—no, not its size," the youth said hesitatingly; "but," brightening, "it has a pearl handle, inlaid with my initials in gold!"

"Oh, Jeminy!" gasped the driver. "Say, sonny, is yer keeper with yer?"

"My keeper? What do you mean, sir?"

"W'y, wot I say. Yer shorely mus' hev er keeper! Yer looney! Er perl han'le, inlaid with gold—ez ef thet made er weepin enny good! Thet beats my time!"

"I don't want you to talk to me!" Augustus said, with such a would-be haughty air that all had to laugh, and Little Punn turned to the driver of one of the coaches and said:

"You heard what he said—that I couldn't ride any further with him. Now can I ride in your coach?"

"Et's jes' ez ther passengers sez, young feller," the driver replied. "I'm willin'."

"All right. Say, people," to Ben and the other members of the "Three Chums" Company, "may I ride in the coach with you?"

"I wouldn't let him do it, if I were you!" interpolated Augustus Pennington. "Make him walk!"

"Oh, you go to grass, greeny!" cried Little Punn, scornfully. "It's not your say-so, anyway, and if you open that big mouth of yours again, I'll jump down your throat!"

The crowd laughed at this, and evidently fearful that Little Punn might do him bodily hurt, Augustus made no reply.

"You are quite welcome to ride in the coach with us, young man," said Ben quietly. "What is your name?"

"A. Little Punn, sir, at your service, and I thank you for your kindness in letting me ride in the coach. It is very good of you, indeed!"

"Don't mention it, you are entirely welcome. But, don't you want something to eat? If so, hasten, as we have already lost considerable time."

"Yes, indeed! I'm hungry, but it won't take me long to eat. Just show me the way to the dining-room, please," to the clerk.

The clerk did as requested, and Little Punn ate a square meal in the short space of nine minutes, and was outside, ready to go. All the other members of the company were already in the coaches, and getting his grip out of the spring wagon, Little Punn made his way to the coach, and climbed in.

"Ta-ta, Gussie!" he cried through the half-open door, as the Boston youth stepped out upon the porch to see the coaches start. "Look out for the bears, panthers, mountain lions, Indians, road agents and sea serpents! They'll get you, if you don't look out!"

"You are an insolent puppy!" cried Augustus, shaking his fist at the youth.

"What's that!" cried Little Punn, making as if to leap out through the half-open door of the coach, and with a cry of fear Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington darted back into the hotel office.

Little Punn closed the coach door and dropped back into the seat with a chuckle, and then Ben Bright laid his hand on the little fellow's shoulder, and said:

"Now, Little Punn, go to work, sir, and tell us the whole story. We know you have been up to mischief, and we know in a general way what that mischief was, but we want the details. We have a long ride ahead of us, and it will help while away the tedium of the journey."

"All right, Ben; I'll tell you the whole story," the little chap said, and then he did so, telling all his adventures after joining the youth from Boston, and he told it all in such a comical way that the audience was convulsed with laughter the larger portion of the time.

"Oh, Punny! Punny! I fear you are a very, very bad boy!" murmured Ben, in mock reproach, when the little chap had finished. "Doesn't your conscience reproach you for the manner in which you have treated—or mistreated, rather—this guileless youth from Boston?"

"I can't say that it does, Ben!" the youth replied, coolly.

"Oh, that would be an impossibility, Ben," said Brown. "He hasn't any conscience!"

"Well, yours is made of sole leather!" grinned Little Punn.

CHAPTER V.

IN YOSEMITE VALLEY.

The coaches were an hour in reaching the Yosemite Valley, and the last part of the trip, being the last stage of the descent, was attended with considerable danger, as it was dark and the drivers had to trust much to the instinct of the horses.

The hotel was reached in safety, however, and with sighs of relief the members of the "Three Chums" Company alighted and passed through the hospitable doors of the hostelry.

At this time of the year there were few tourists, and there was plenty of room in the hotel, so Ben and his friends had the best rooms, taking up nearly the whole front, where they could look out in the morning and see the giant cliffs towering from a half to three-quarters of a mile toward the sky.

The first thing to engage the attention of Ben and his friends was supper, and after that, as was their custom, they repaired to the parlor for a couple of hours for social converse before retiring for the night.

"I wonder how Augustus Fitz-Percy is getting along?" murmured Little Punn.

"I'll wager his hair is standing on end yet!" said Markham.

"Say, wasn't he scared, though, when you fellows jumped out into the road!" chuckled Little Punn. "I thought he would jump out of the wagon and take to the timber!"

"Yet he managed to draw that little twenty-two," said Spalding.

"Yes, and if you hadn't grabbed his wrists, and held his hands steady, he'd have shot himself, likely, or the driver or me. He was trembling like a house afire!"

"Don't you think you gave the poor fellow most too bad a scare?" asked Ben. "I really felt sorry for him."

"And so did I," coincided Dorothy.

"Well, you wouldn't have felt sorry for him if you had been with him awhile and heard him brag and blow," said Little Punn. "Why, he is the most utterly egotistic fellow it was ever my misfortune to have anything to do with, and he is as ignorant as a seven-year-old! I never saw his match!"

"I have seen his match," said Brown.

"Where?"

Brown pointed at Little Punn.

"There's his match," he said coolly.

"That may be," grinned the little chap. "I may be his match, but I have you all as witnesses that he did not dare strike me!"

"That's right, Punny; he didn't!"

"No; he took water!"

"Not all the time," eared Little Punn. "He had a quart bottle of wine in that grip Patsy wanted to swipe, and he took a drink about every half hour, and never asked the driver or myself to join him!"

"That was tough, Punny!"

"I should say so!"

"Augustus Fitz-Percy is somewhat shy on good manners!"

"Shure an' av Oi had known dhe woin wur in dhe ghrip, Oi'd have swoiped it, just to get it away from dhe felly, begorra!" cried Patsy.

"Of course, that is all he would have taken it for—just to get it away from the Boston youth!" said Little Punn in a tone intended to imply doubt. "Of eourse—Patsy wouldn't have touched a drop of the wine himself!"

"Oh, go on wid yez!" cried Patsy. "Shure, an' Oi know phwat would have happened to dhe woin av Litthle Punn had got hould av it!"

"Of course; I should have smashed the bottle on a roek!"

"Yis—afther dhe bottlle wur impty!"

"Ha-ha-ha! He's got it on you, Punny!" ehuekled Brown, in great glee. "Patsy has you figured down fine!"

"Bah! He's been listening to some of your lies about me, Brownie!" said the little chap nonchalantly. "It's hearsay evidenee, and doesn't go with this jury."

"Do you think Augustus Pennington will come on to the valley?" asked Tom True. "Or will he eonclude he has seen enough, and head baek for Raymond in the morning?"

"Oh, he'll come to the valley," said Little Punn. "That little racket of to-day won't worry him any. He hasn't sense enough to become more than temporarily frightened. By to-morrow he will imagine that he put the road agents to flight with that mighty twenty-two of his, and will go out in search of more bands to eonquer."

"Say, that's a superior weapon—that twenty-two—isn't it!" remarked Rhyme.

"It certainly is!" laughed Little Punn. "It has a pearl handle inlaid with Augustus Fitz-Percy's initials in gold! Oh, say! pound me on the baek, somebody! That makes me lose my breath!"

Thump! Spalding took Little Punn between the shoulders, nearly knocking him off his chair, and as the big fellow drew back to strike another blow, the little ehap hastened to get out of reach.

"Thanks!" he murmured, "but I have my breath again, now!"

"Do you suppose the Boston youth will realize the fact

that he was the victim of a praetical joke?" asked Mamie Blair. "If he should do so, and suspect you boys, might he not make it unpleasant for you?"

"Not he!" answered Little Punn. "He would never suspect suelh a thing himself, and if the driver or the hotel people should, and would tell him their suspicions, he would reject the idea with seorn. What, give up such an adventure as that? Relinquish such material for wonderful stories to admiring friends when he returns to Boston—not he! No, indeed! He would want to fight them for hinting at suelh a thing!"

"I think Little Punn is right," assented Tom True. "He would reject such a theory with scorn, and the driver and hotel people would not bother with him when they saw he did not wish to be eonvinced."

"That's right."

"Oh, we are safe."

"It will never be known that we were mixed up in that affair."

"It is likely to be suspected, however," smiled Ben. "I think those stagedrivers smelt a mouse. I saw them look at each other several times, and wink, while that little seene was taking place in front of the hotel."

"They may suspect, but they do not know," said Tom True, "and if they were to tell their suspicions, they would not be believed, so we are all right."

"They couldn't do anything with us, anyway," said Markham. "It was merely a joke."

"There isn't a jury in the land that would render a verdict against us for having fun with Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington," declared Little Punn. "Unless it would be because we had not given it to him harder."

"Augustus doesn't like you any more, Punny!" said Sawyer. "He won't let you play in his yard when you go down to Boston!"

"That's right. He has Punny off his list."

"I pity Punny if Augustus gets hold of him!"

"Oh, Punny is in no danger, whatever. He's 'a common person,' you know, and Augustus would not lower himself by laying hands on him!"

"That's so. It's lucky for Punny he is a common fellow!"

"Bah! I could lick a forty-acre lot full of suelh fellows!" Little Punn declared. "I wish he had got down out of the wagon when I dared him to, to-day. I suffered so much in his eompany that I wanted to get a liek or two at him to get even!"

Then the conversation turned to other subjects, and at nine o'clock all went to their rooms, as they wished to be up bright and early next morning. They were to spend

only one day in the valley, and would need all the daylight they could get, if they were to see the objects of interest.

All the members of the company were up, and had breakfasted by the time daylight had fairly broke in the valley, and half an hour later they were out, enjoying the wonderful beauty of the scenery.

This valley was very different from the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. The canyon is ten or twelve miles wide, and is very rough, being partially filled with great rocks, hills, peaks and mountains, being as perfect a representation of chaos as could be desired; while the Yosemite Valley is only from half a mile to a mile in width and the floor is nearly level, being covered with grass and trees.

"How beautiful the scenery is!" exclaimed Dorothy, after all had stood and gazed for some minutes in silent admiration.

"Oh, this is perfectly lovely!" cried Mamie.

"It is not so grand or awe-inspiring as the Grand Canyon," said Miss Small; "but it is more beautiful. And how high the cliffs are! Isn't it wonderful!"

"Indeed it is!" coincided Dorothy. "The walls of this valley are higher than those of the Grand Canyon, are they not, Ben?"

"No," the youth replied; "not so high. The canyon walls average nearly a mile in height, while these range from a half to three-quarters of a mile. These look higher, however, on account of the narrowness of the valley."

"That is probably what makes the difference, Ben."

"Yes; the valley is so narrow that, if you will notice, the walls seem nearer together at their tops than at the bases. They seem to lean inward."

"So they do."

"That's right!"

"They do, for a fact!"

"I thought they did lean inward."

"And don't they, Ben?"

"No; they are almost perpendicular. It is an optical illusion."

"It is wonderful!" said Dorothy. "How glad I am that we have been so fortunate as to get to see all these wonders! There is the Mammoth Cave, the Grand Canyon, Death Valley, Yosemite Valley, and you say that we are to see the Cliff Dwellings on our way back!"

"And sometime we must see the Yellowstone National Park," said Ben. "We won't have time to visit it, this trip, as it is too far out of the way, but perhaps we shall visit the West again at some future day."

"There is no reason why we should not, when we can do so not only at no expense, but actually make money besides!" said Dorothy.

"Right, Dorothy. The play, 'Three Chums,' has proven to be a valuable piece of property, indeed!"

"How high up in the mountains is this valley, Mr. Bright?" asked Hinkle.

"The floor of the valley, where we are now standing, is four thousand feet above sea level, Mr. Hinkle."

"That is up a ways, of itself, and just think of the walls rising from a half to three quarters of a mile higher still! I wonder what that peak is called?" pointing to one lifting its head majestically. "I believe the majority of the peaks and domes have names, have they not, Mr. Bright?"

"Yes, sir. I have a portfolio of views of the valley, at home, and have looked at the views so often that I recognize the different peaks and domes. I believe I can name every one. That peak you speak of is 'El Capitan,' and its summit is seven thousand three hundred feet above the sea level, and three thousand three hundred above the floor of the valley."

"That is considerably over half a mile in height."

"Yes. And yonder; do you see that peak that has the appearance of a bunch of peaks, one higher than the rest?"

"Yes."

"Those are the 'Cathedral Rocks,' and are two thousand six hundred and sixty feet above the floor of the valley."

Then the party moved on down the valley, walking slowly, and pausing every few minutes to gaze about them, as new sights came into view.

"Yonder," said Ben presently, "is 'Half Dome,' the highest peak of all. It is eight thousand seven hundred and thirty-seven feet above sea level, and four thousand seven hundred and thirty-seven feet above the floor of the valley."

"I'd like to stand on that dome and make a speech to the multitudes!" murmured Little Punn. "Wouldn't it be grand!"

"Which—the dome or the speech?" asked Spalding.

"Both!" said the little chap airily.

"Say, I don't think Punny ought to say much about Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington!" said Brown. "There are few who can hold a candle to him for silliness!"

"I know one who as compared to me for silliness is as a calcium light to a kerosene lamp without any oil in it! The fellow is Brownie!" and Little Punn chuckled gleefully.

"Yonder," said Ben, "are 'Three Brothers.' They are nearly as high as the 'Half Dome.'"

"And where are the three sisters, Ben?" asked Little Punn. "I don't care anything about the three brothers!"

"Shut up!" growled Spalding, giving the little chap a shove. "You and Brown are worse than the plague!"

"Especially Brownie!" caroled Little Punn. "I always knew you were bashful, Spaldy, old man!"

"Who said anything about being bashful, you little half-size?"

"You. You were talking about being plagued!"

Spalding slapped at Little Punn, but the little chap was on his guard, and dodged in time.

"Shall I take Punny back and lock him up in his room in the hotel, Ben?" asked Spalding.

"No, let him alone," smiled Ben. "I don't mind him."

"Ben likes the girls himself!" grinned the little chap. "If Ben and I had had the naming of those peaks, yonder, they would have borne the name of 'Three Sisters' to-day instead of 'Three Brothers,' which is a very poor name and means nothing."

"Just like you, when you talk!" sneered Brown. "You mean nothing!"

"I do when I want to," the little chap said serenely; "which is more than you can say."

The party moved onward, and presently reached a point from which the falls could be viewed.

"Yonder," said Ben, "are the 'Yosemite Falls,' the highest in the world, so far as is known. They fall a distance of two thousand six hundred feet!"

"Phew!"

"Say, that is a jump, isn't it!"

"That beats Niagara for height!"

"It does that!"

"Sure!"

"I wonder if Sam Patch would have attempted to jump those falls, the same as he did the Niagara!" exclaimed Little Punn.

"Yonder, where you see that sheet of spray," said Ben, "is the 'Bridal Veil,' fall. It leaps a distance of nine hundred feet."

"Now, that's a name that is a name!" exclaimed Little Punn. "I'll leave it to the girls, if that isn't a splendid name for the waterfall!"

"It is, indeed!" smiled Dorothy.

"It is just lovely!" acquiesced Mamie.

"Yes, indeed!" assented Miss Small, with a sly glance at Mr. Hinkle. "A more beautiful name could not by any possibility have been selected!"

"There! I told you so!" cried Little Punn triumphantly. "I know a good name when I hear it!"

"You certainly do!" smiled Ben.

Then the party moved here and there, pausing to look at the "Vernal" and "Nevada" falls, both of which are in the Merced river where it empties into the valley, and which are four hundred and six hundred feet in height.

Then they viewed "Glacier Point," "North Dome" and "Washington Column" in turn, and finally, as it was nearing the noon hour, started to return to the hotel to eat dinner.

In doing so, they passed the point where the road used by the stage line entered the valley, and Tom True, happening to look up the trail, suddenly exclaimed:

"Look yonder! There is Augustus Fitz-Percy's rig, and it is about to fall over the precipice! Horse, wagon and all will go in a minute, unless the driver has help! See! He is hanging on to the wheels next the bluff and is holding the wagon from going over, but he can't do it much longer!"

"And Fitz-Percy is hanging to some bushes twenty feet below!" cried Little Punn. "If the wagon goes over, it will carry Gussie to certain death!"

"We must go to their aid!" cried Ben. "Follow me!" and he bounded away, up the trail like a chamois!

CHAPTER VI.

BEN AND HIS FRIENDS TO THE RESCUE.

The parties in question were certainly sorely in need of aid.

In some manner, the outside wheels of the spring wagon had slipped over the edge of the precipice, spilling Augustus Pennington out, and the driver had evidently leaped out on the other side, and, seizing the wheels on that side, was holding back with all his might, and was keeping the vehicle from falling over, but he could not hold on long, as, even though the wagon was not heavy, it was being pulled downward by gravity, and must inevitably go over, unless the man was reinforced and received aid.

The scene of the accident was perhaps two hundred yards up the trail, and the precipice at that point was about one hundred and fifty feet in height—more than sufficient fall to cause the death of horses and youth, should they fall to the bottom. The driver could, of course, save himself by simply letting go of the wheels, and he was next to and standing with his back nearly against the wall of rock along which the trail ran.

Ben ran up the steep trail as fast as he could, followed by the other youths to the number of a dozen at least, shouting:

"Hold on! We're coming! Stick to it! We'll be there in a jiffy!" and while the driver made no reply, he evidently heard, for he turned his head and looked in the direction from which the voice sounded.

It would have been a steep climb up the trail at any time, and at a moderate gait, but now when negotiating it at a run, the climb was very exhausting, indeed. The youths were blessed with good lungs, however, and were not long in reaching the scene of the accident.

"Whoa, boys!" said Ben, soothingly, as he passed the horses, which, although frightened, were not acting fractious, and then, reaching the driver's side, he too, caught hold of the wheels.

"One of you boys take hold of the horses' bits," called Ben, over his shoulder. "The rest come here. We'll have this wagon back in the road gain in less than no time!"

"Yer jes' got hyar in time!" the man gasped, the perspiration standing out on his forehead in great drops, although the day was far from warm. "I couldn't hev hilt on mutch longer."

"Help! Help!" came up from below, in quavering tones. "Help me, somebody, quick, or I will fall!"

Ben had forgotten about Augustus Fitz-Percy, but this brought the youth back to his mind, and he called out:

"Hold tight, Pennington! Hang on for a few minutes longer, and we will have you up from there!"

Then the other youths crowded about the ends and side of the spring wagon, Pinky Sweet having seized the horses' bits, and catching hold of the vehicle, lifted it with ease, and replaced it in the middle of the trail.

"Thar! Now she's safe!" the man exclaimed. "I'm much obleeged ter yer, fellers, I am so! I'd hev lost my team an' waggin' shore ez shootin', ef yer hedn't happened erlong!"

"That's all right," said Ben. "Now we must get that young fellow out of his trouble. Have you a rope?"

"No, but we kin use ther lines. The two uv 'em fastened tergether'll reech 'im, I guess."

"We can try it, anyway," said Ben. "But how did this happen?"

"He wuz ther cause uv et," the man said, nodding toward the edge of the precipice.

"How was that?" the youth inquired in surprise.

"W'y, yer see," said the man, unfastening, and proceeding to remove the lines from the harness as he talked, "jes' ez we wuz turnin' ther corner yonder," pointing to where, thirty or forty feet distant the trail made a short turn around an out-jutting wall of rock, ther feller, who wuz a-ettin' on the side nex' ter ther precrpus, got skeered, an' afore I knowed wot he wuz up ter he hed grabbed my arm—ter keep frum fallin' out. I s'pose, but in a doin' uv thet he jerked ther line an' ther nigh hoss, which is kinder tender-mouthed, ennyway, wuz pulled out ter ther side uv ther trail, an' then, kersmash! go—ther nigh wheels over ther

edge, an' out goes ther young feller like er fla-h! I jumped out on the off side, an' grabbed ther wheels an' hilt on, ez yer seed, but I couldn't hev kep' ther waggin' frum goin' over. Et'd a-went purty soon!"

"Did you ever hear the like of that!" cried Little Pun. "Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington was the cause of it all! I knew it! I knew it! Say, fellows, I'm mighty glad I quit the fellow, and did not come in this rig! I'd have been a 'deader' by this time, otherwise!"

"You were in luck, sure enough, Punny," assented Tom True.

By this time the man had removed the lines from the harness, and then Ben took them and tied them together.

"Now, fellows," he said, "a couple of you take hold of the hind wheel of the wagon with one hand, and hold to two others with the other hand, while those two hold to me. Then I will lean out over the edge of the precipice and lower the lines to Augustus. Hurry! The poor fellow is, judging from the sound of his voice, almost exhausted!"

"Oh, you can't tell anything by that, Ben," said Little Pun. "He's probably just scared."

"Well, he has cause to be frightened. There; that is all right," as the boys did as they had been told; "now hold to me! I don't care about going over!"

"If you go, we'll all go, Ben!" replied Tom True, grimly.

"That's right!"

"You bet!"

"We'll hold you, Ben!"

"You couldn't get away from us if you wanted to!"

"All right," and then Ben, standing with his feet at the very edge of the precipice, leaned outward at an angle of forty-five degrees, and looked down upon Augustus Pennington.

A glance showed him that the Boston youth was in no danger of falling, if he kept his head, for the bushes in which he had lodged were very strong and hardy, were in fact almost young trees.

"You are all right, Pennington!" called down Ben, encouragingly. "We will have you out of there in a jiffy!"

"I—I can't h—hold on much longer!" the Boston youth answered in quavering tones.

"Why, my dear boy, you don't need to hold on at all!" said Ben. "Those bushes will hold you up, without that. You are all right."

"It—it's easy enough for y—you to t—talk!" Pennington replied. "B—but if y—you w—were in m—my p—place, y—you'd think differently!"

Ben made no reply, but lowered the line, and was glad to see that it was long enough for his purpose.

"Tie the line around your waist under your arms," he called down; "then I will pull you up."

"I—I can't!" the youth called back. "I—I daren't let go with my hands!"

"Nonsense!" cried Ben sharply; though he felt sorry for the fellow; "brace your feet firmly, and stand up. You can do it easily. You will have to do it!"

"Is—isn't there any way y—you can g—get me out, besides t—this?" the youth called up tremblingly.

"Absolutely no other way. You must do as I tell you. Brace yourself, now, and stand up!"

Ben was fearful that the youth would refuse to do as told, but he did not, and after making several efforts, managed to stand up, though he swayed considerably.

"Now tie the line around your body, under your arms," cried Ben sharply, as if speaking to a child, and the youth got hold of the line, and did as told.

"Tie it good and tight," said Ben. "Make a hard knot of it."

"All ri—right!" came the reply, and presently the youth called out:

"I—I've got it tied. Are y—you sure y—you can l—lift me?"

"Perfectly sure!" answered Ben. "I want you to do just as I tell you, however. Will you do it?"

"Y—yes; if I can."

"It is easy enough. I want you to hang perfectly limp and quiet. You must not struggle, or kick around. Do you understand?"

"Y—yes."

"All right. Now I'm going to begin hoisting you up! Hold steady, boys," this last to the youths who were holding him.

Then Ben began lifting the Boston youth, who, as his feet left the bushes and he felt himself swinging in mid-air, gave utterance to a faint shriek of terror.

"Don't be frightened," called Ben. "You are perfectly safe!" and slowly and steadily, foot by foot, he lifted the youth, and a few moments later brought him over the edge of the cliff in safety, and laid him in the middle of the trail.

Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington was so weak from fright that he could not stand. In truth, he was in almost a fainting condition, and had to be lifted into the wagon. He could not sit up, so he lay down in the wagon-box, on the driver's overcoat, and then as soon as the lines had been returned to the harness, the driver got up on the front seat and drove slowly and carefully down to the level floor of the valley, the youth following on foot.

"Oh, Ben, I am so glad you boys were in time to save the

life of that poor young man, and keep the horses and wagon from falling over the cliff!" cried Dorothy.

"So am I, little chum!" Ben replied. "Had the horse and wagon gone over they would have carried Pennington to a horrible death!"

"So they would!" with a shudder. "I am almost vexed at the boys for playing that joke on the poor fellow, yesterday! He is having such a hard time!"

"He was to blame for this occurrence, just as he was to blame for the boys playing the joke on him," said Ben. "His egotism brought on the one, and his cowardice caused the other," and then he explained how the accident occurred.

"Still, the poor fellow is more to be pitied than blamed," said Dorothy. "He cannot help being possessed of such a nature."

"Oh, you're the tenderest-hearted girl I ever saw!" said Little Punn. "I do believe you'd be sorry for even Blues Brown if he was to break his arm or neck!"

"So I should!" smiled Dorothy. "I should even be sorry for you if you were to get hurt!"

"Now will you be good!" cried Brown in huge delight. "Oh, but that was a squelcher! And served you right, too, Punny!"

"Oh, Dorothy, how could you!" murmured Little Punn reproachfully. "You are cruel, cruel, to wring my tender trusting heart in such a manner! I did not think you capable of such heartlessness, Dorothy!" and the little rascal pretended to sob as if heartbroken.

"Poor, poor little boy!" murmured Mamie, patting the little fellow on the back, intending to disconcert him, but she did not yet thoroughly know Little Punn, who turned the laugh on the jolly girl by promptly throwing his arms around her neck, laying his head on Mamie's shoulder, and sobbing more violently than ever!"

"Oh, you little rascal!" exclaimed Mamie, and as she jerked his arms from around her neck and pushed him aside, everybody, herself and Little Punn included, laughing heartily.

The little rascal bent nearly double and fairly shouted with laughter, and when Mamie shook her finger at him and said she would get even with him sometime, he only laughed the more.

"I hope you will get even with me, Mamie," he said, presently, "if you will get even with me the same way!"

Brown, who had a secret notion that Mamie Blair was about the sweetest girl who ever lived, was somewhat incensed.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Punny!" he said

severely. "Really no one would blame Miss Blair if she were to be real angry with you!"

"Oh, go on, Brownie!" cried Little Punn. "You're just jealous, and mad because it wasn't you, that's all! Besides Mamie liked it—didn't you, Mamie? That's what girls are for—to hug!"

The crowd had to laugh in spite of itself. The air of the little chap was such that he did not give offense, and was so whimsical withal, that although the girls blushed, they had to laugh, too.

"I do believe that you are the most impudent boy that ever I saw!" Mamie cried. "You are utterly incorrigible!"

"That's an awful big word for a little chap like me to be!" Little Punn cheerfully remarked.

The driver of the spring wagon had continued on in the direction of the hotel, and Ben's party was coming after the vehicle at a leisurely pace, reaching the hotel a minute or so after the wagon containing Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington arrived there.

The driver had to help the youth out of the vehicle, but he did brace up a bit as soon as he was on the solid ground, and managed to walk to and into the hotel.

"Augustus Fitz-Percy seems sort of wilted-like, doesn't he!" remarked Little Punn.

"Yes—something like you did when you fell over the precipice at the Grand Canyon!" said Blues Brown.

"Or like you did the time your best girl told you you needn't call again!" grinned Little Punn.

"Oh, go along, Punny! You're too fresh!"

"Well, I'd rather be too fresh than as out of date as you are!"

The members of Ben's party entered the hotel, and going to their rooms, made their toilets and went down to dinner.

The youth from Boston entered while they were still there, and he looked somewhat like his former self. He had recovered his equanimity sufficiently so that he grumbled at his food, and found fault with everything, to the disgust of the waiter, who finally told the youth that if he didn't like the food he could let it alone, and then went away and left Augustus alone, refusing to return even when the youth from Boston pounded on the edge of his plate with the handle of his knife loud enough to be heard upstairs.

"Serves him right!" said Markham. "He's a regular mob! Instead of putting on airs like that he ought to be thanking his lucky stars he's alive!"

"Oh, come now, don't be hard on the poor fellow, Markham," said Little Punn. "Really, I doubt if he knows he's alive!"

At about half-past one o'clock Ben's party went out

again, and saw as much of the valley as they could, there being a number of objects of interest that had been missed in the forenoon.

"To see all the sights of the valley, and see them thoroughly," said Ben, "a week ought to be spent here, but that, of course, is out of the question. We have, however, seen all the leading objects, and I am very well satisfied."

"And I," said Dorothy Dare.

"I think we have done the valley pretty thoroughly," said Lottie Small.

"Yes, as Mr. Bright says, we have seen the most important objects of interest," said Hinkle.

"Even including the great, the only Augustus Fitz-Percy Pennington!" murmured Little Punn.

"Punny, I shall be forced to put my foot on your neck, one of these days!" threatened Spalding.

"Just let me know which one of the days it will be, Spaldy, and I'll be out when you and your big feet drop in!"

The party returned to the hotel in time for supper, and then repaired to the parlor.

Ben informed all of the fact that they were to start on their return to Raymond early in the morning, and in order that they might be able to rise early all retired at an early hour.

CHAPTER VII.

A BOLD ROBBERY.

"San Francisco—all out!"

The brakenian bawled this announcement in through the open doorway of the car, and there was a general stir as the passengers rose in a body to leave the car.

Ben Bright and the members of his company had donned their wraps, secured their grips, umbrellas, etc., since entering the outskirts of the city, so were ready to leave the car at once, being among the first to step down upon the platform.

Fern met them, and after shaking hands with Ben, led the way to the carriages, which all proceeded to enter. Ben stood facing one of the carriages, his steel-lined money-grip held in his right hand, while with his left he assisted Dorothy, Mamie and Miss Small to enter. Then Hinkle stepped into the carriage, and Ben was just on the point of doing so when he felt the money-grip torn from his hand!

With a cry of astonishment and anger Ben whirled and made a grab for the individual—a tall, slender fellow, with

slouch hat, and roughly dressed—who had jerked the grip out of his hand.

The fellow was just beyond Ben's reach, however, and was now running with all speed across the street toward a side street.

Instantly Ben leaped after the fleeing thief, shouting back over his shoulder as he did so: "You folks go on to the hotel! I'll join you there, presently!"

Ben did not take his eyes off the man with the grip for an instant, but settled down to work and ran with all his might in an effort to overhaul the daring thief.

Tom True had seen the fellow jerk the grip out of Ben's hand and run, and he had leaped forward, and was following Ben as closely as he was able, so as to be present to lend his chum assistance, if necessary, when the thief was overtaken.

This, to Ben Bright's surprise, turned out to be a much more difficult task than he had anticipated. The robber could and did run like a greyhound, and even though burdened with the grip, ran so swiftly that, although Ben gained on him, it was very slowly indeed.

Even though the matter was a serious one, the grip containing upward of twenty thousand dollars, Ben could not help admiring the wonderful sprinting ability of the fellow.

"That fellow could easily be the champion runner of the world, if he were to try for it!" the youth said to himself. "But he is bothered with the grip, and I ought to be able to overhaul him!" And then Ben buckled down to the work harder than ever.

Up the cross street, which was little more than an alley, ran the robber, down the next street he turned, and continuing in this direction a block, turned up the next cross street, which was a very narrow street, with tall tenement buildings on either side, the ground floor and basement of nearly every building being given up to saloons and dives of various descriptions.

Ben was close behind the robber, but as soon as he saw the character of the street his heart sank, for he knew that there could easily be a hundred places where the fellow could dart in and find a score of fellows of like ilk who would help him to escape capture.

Realizing this, Ben redoubled his exertions, and drew up with the fleeing man more rapidly, but while he was yet twelve to fifteen feet behind, the thief suddenly darted down the steps of a half basement, and bursting through the swinging doors with a crash, disappeared from view!

Ben Bright was not the youth to hesitate, however, or count the danger, and without slackening his speed an iota he leaped down the steps at a single bound and leaped

through between the banging swinging doors like a miniature eyeline.

The youth's quick eye took in his surroundings at one swift, sweeping glance. He saw that he was in a saloon of the worst type, frequented by roughs, thieves and desperadoes, and at this time there were about twenty such fellows in the room, which was a long narrow one, with a high partition built across it about forty feet back from the front door. And, just as Ben leaped into the room, the thief with the grip was just going through a doorway in this partition.

Without a word or cry, and without paying any attention to the inmates of the place, Ben leaped toward the doorway in question like a panther.

In an instant, however, he was made to realize that the inmates of the saloon were friends to the thief and would aid him to escape, for two fellows got in his way with a very poor assumption of careless unpremeditation. Ben knew it was done purposely, and he brushed them out of his way with such force, summoning all the strength of his wonderful arms for the purpose, that they were hurled to the floor! Then the youth leaped onward, clearing a large, round-topped card table which had been shoved in his way at a bound.

Cries of anger from the two fallen men, and of surprise at the remarkable strength and agility displayed by the youth from the other inmates sounded, but they were determined to interfere and stop the pursuit of their fellow in crime, and three or four of them leaped forward and put their backs to the door.

Ben's blood was up, however, and he did not pause or hesitate, but leaping forward, seized two of the fellows and threw them aside as if they had been straw men! Then before the other two could get over their surprise, for they had expected to see the youth pause and parley, he had seized them also and hurled them to one side.

Then, seizing the doorknob, Ben turned it, jerked the door open and leaped through into the back room.

He looked all about the room quickly, but not a sign of the man with the stolen grip was to be seen. There were four men seated at a table in the centre of the room, engaged in playing cards, but the thief was not one of them.

And what was a very strange thing, there seemed to be no means by which he could have escaped from the room in the short space of time that he had had for the purpose. There was no stairway leading either upstairs or down toward a cellar, and as Ben gave a quick glance around he saw that there was no hiding-place in the room, not a single place that would afford concealment to a man.

There was a rear door, opening, as Ben judged, into a

stairway leading to an alley at the rear, but he could not see out, the glass in the two windows being frosted.

This door seemed to be the only possible point that would have afforded the robber egress, and Ben gave it his attention.

Stepping to it, he first unlocked it, then unbolted it and tried to open the door, only to find it would not open.

"Who are you, and what are you trying to do?" asked one of the men at the table.

"I'm trying to open this door," Ben replied quietly.

"Well, you can't do it. That door is nailed shut—has been for months."

Instantly Ben saw the man had spoken truly, and he turned away, a bewildered look on his face, just as Tom True, panting and excited, burst into the room.

"Did you catch him, Ben?" he cried.

"You here, Tom!" in surprise. "No; I lost him. The last I saw of him, he was coming through that doorway into this room."

"And he isn't here, now?" cried Tom. "Why, where could he have gone?"

"That's the question, and it is one which," turning to the men at the card table, "I would like you to answer."

"What is it, young fellow?" asked one with a coolly insolent smile. "What is it you wish to know?"

"I wish to know where that man went who came in here just ahead of me."

"Where the man went who came in here ahead of you!" exclaimed the man in a tone of surprise, or at least a good counterfeit of surprise; "why, my dear young friend, no man came in here ahead of you! You are the first person who has entered the room in the last two hours!"

Ben gave the fellow a searching glance, and decided he was a thorough scoundrel and an able and accomplished liar.

"Begging your pardon, but I myself saw the man enter this room less than a minute ago!" said Ben quietly, but decidedly.

"You must be mistaken, my young friend," the man said suavely. "I saw no man enter this room, nor did my friends, here, eh, gentlemen?" turning toward the other three men.

"I saw no man."

"Nor I."

"No man came into the room, young man."

"You see," smiled the first spokesman; "you were mistaken."

"I was not mistaken!" declared Ben firmly. "Of course, I cannot say that you saw the man—though I don't see how you could help doing so—but I do say that a man carrying a grip entered this room a minute ago. I know it

because he stole the grip from me, and I was chasing him. I was in the room, out there, when he was passing through the doorway, and saw him as plainly as I see you now. What puzzles me, though, is where he could have gone so quickly. There is some secret way of leaving this room, and I would be much obliged if you would show it to me."

The four men, who were evidently gamblers, and while well-dressed, were anything but prepossessing in appearance, laughed in an irritatingly insolent manner.

"You amuse me, young fellow!" the one who had done most of the talking said. "You must be—excuse me—slightly off your trolley, young man!"

"Shall I smash him, Ben?" asked Tom, who was made very angry by the fellow's words and insolent air; but Ben shook his head.

"No, don't fool with them, Tom," he said. "We are losing valuable time, even now. We'll look around and see if we can't open up some secret door, or something of the kind," and he stepped to the wall and began making his way along it, thumping on the wainscoting every six or eight inches, with his fist, and listening carefully.

"Here! What are you about?" the man cried. "This has gone far enough, young fellow! What right have you to intrude in here upon us, and make a nuisance of yourself by thumping around on the walls? I object, and ask you to leave the room, at once!"

"Oh, you do!" remarked Ben icily. His blood was up, and he made up his mind that if the men tried to force him to leave the room he would make it lively for them.

"Yes, I do!" was the snarling reply.

"Very well," coolly; "produce the scoundrel who stole my grip, or tell me where he went, and we will leave the room immediately. Otherwise we shall remain until I have made a thorough search for a hidden doorway, or something of the kind."

The four men looked at each other in an undecided manner. There was something in the air of the youth and in his tone that told them he was thoroughly in earnest, and they hesitated to take any steps toward trying to force the youths to leave the room.

Ben continued his work, thumping away in a determined manner, and if there was a secret door he bade fair to find it.

The man who had done most of the talking rose from the table and approached Ben, but Tom True placed himself in front of the fellow and waved him back.

"You had best not try to interfere!" he said threateningly. "I advise you to keep your distance!"

The man smiled in a manner intended to be suave and reassuring.

"I have no intention of interfering," he said. "I just want to ask your friend a question, that is all."

"Oh, all right, then; go ahead," said Tom, stepping aside; but he kept a close watch on the fellow just the same.

Ben kept right ahead with his work, paying no attention to the fellow, for he knew Tom would watch him.

The gambler stepped forward and, pausing near Ben, said:

"I'd like to ask you a question, young man."

"Fire away," said Ben quietly, continuing thumping the wainscoting.

"It is this: Did the grip you say the fellow robbed you of contain anything of value?"

Ben knew what the fellow was up to, instantly. He knew who the fellow was who had the grip, knew where he could be found, and if the grip contained anything of value would follow the fellow up and force him to divide the booty. Ben would not, of course, have told the fellow the true contents of the grip, anyway, but this knowledge made him even less likely to do so, and so he replied in an off-hand manner:

"There is nothing of any particular value to anybody save myself. The contents were mostly clothing, and a few papers which could do no one else any good; but it is my grip, and I am averse, on principle, to allowing myself to be robbed in this manner, without making an effort to recover my property. I'm going to have that grip back, if it costs ten times what it is worth to do it!"

"Bah! I wouldn't fool with it, if I were you, if it contains nothing of any particular value, for I don't think you will succeed in getting the grip back."

Ben turned his head and looked at the fellow a few moments in silence. Then he reached in his pocket, and drew forth a roll of bills. Selecting a ten-dollar note, he held it out toward the gambler.

"Tell me where the fellow went, and that is yours," he said quietly.

A sneer curled the fellow's lips, as he said:

"You mistake your man, young fellow, if you think to bribe me. Ten times ten dollars wouldn't do it, even if I knew where the man with your grip was, which I do not."

"Don't you?" remarked Ben, in a tone which said as plainly as words could have done. "I don't believe you!"

The fellow understood it, too, for an angry exclamation escaped him, and he made a threatening motion toward the cool youth, who as he spoke returned the money to his pocket and resumed the work of thumping the wainscoting. But Tom True was in front of the man like a flash, and pushing him back said warningly:

"Go slow, my friend! You had better go back to your game!"

The fellow glared at Tom fiercely, but his look was returned with interest. Tom True, when thoroughly aroused, was as brave and fierce as a Numidian lion, and a regiment of gamblers could not have frightened him. The fellow, who, as a result of his calling, was a good judge of human nature, realized this fact, too, and, turning on his heels, returned to the table and seated himself.

"Go ahead with the game," he said to the others. "When those two fellows have pounded all the hide off their knuckles, they will be willing to go, I guess! Your deal, Jess."

Ben smiled grimly, but gave no other sign that he had heard the remark, but Tom True glared at the fellow as if he contemplated attacking him. He thought better of it, however, and contented himself with simply glaring his anger and contempt.

Ben made his way along each of the four sides of the room, testing the walls carefully, and finally made the rounds, arriving at the door, on the opposite side from which he had started. And nowhere had he found a place that gave back a hollow, or suspicious sound, as of an opening behind it, or as of a loose panel. Everywhere the wainscoting seemed absolutely solid.

"Well, are you satisfied now?" the gambler who had done most of the talking asked. "Has your idea regarding the entrance of the man into this room undergone any change?"

"No," replied Ben quietly. "I saw him enter. I admit that I cannot conceive how he got out of the room, but am as confident as ever that there is a secret exit somewhere. I am going to look at the floor for a trapdoor, and then if I find nothing I shall withdraw."

"Well, you are a stubborn youngster, sure enough!" the gambler said, turning once more to the game.

Ben looked at every square foot of the floor, examining it even under the table the men were seated about, much to their disgust, but found nothing in the way of a trapdoor.

"Well," he said quietly; "I shall have to give up. I cannot find out how the fellow got out of the room, so will withdraw. Sorry to have disturbed you, gentlemen! Come, Tom."

"Oh, don't mention it!" the man replied. "Say, young fellow, I suppose you wouldn't like to join us in a friendly game?" this last in a wheedling, insinuating tone.

"Thank you, no. We do not play cards for money!" replied Ben.

"Oh, we merely put up a small ante just to make it in-

teresting," the fellow replied. "No one would call a ten-cent ante, dollar limit game playing for money."

"I should," quietly. "And a good deal of money may be won or lost in such a game. A penny ante game is playing for money just as much as a dollar ante game is playing for money."

"I differ with you, young man."

"That is your privilege, sir. But I am absolutely certain I am right. Come ahead, Tom."

Then he opened the door, and passed out into the front room, the saloon proper, followed by his chum, and as they entered they were greeted by a series of angry exclamations and threats from the inmates:

"Dere dey air!"

"Dem's ther cusses!"

"Dat's right! Dey're der blokes wot needs er poundin', an' needs et bad!"

"Let's do 'em up, fellers!"

"Yes, let's do!"

"Let's poun' ther daylights outen 'em!"

"Yer bet! Thet's ther talk!"

"Foller me, fellers! We'll rush 'em, an' mop up ther floor wid deir karkusses!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A VALUABLE ALLY.

Ben had been in the other room several minutes, and his mind had been on the fellow who had stolen his grip, consequently the little episode of his encounter with some of the fellows as he entered a few minutes before had slipped his mind. Now, however, it all came back to him, and he realized that Tom and himself were in a bad box. These fellows were toughs of the worst description, and if they succeeded in overpowering the two youths, would injure them severely, might even kill them.

"We're in for it, Tom!" said Ben in a low voice. "Fight as hard as you can, and at the first opportunity, break through and escape."

"I'll go when you go!" said Tom. "And not a moment before! We are two of three chums who are 'all for one and one for all,' and I'll stand by you to the death!"

There was no time for more words, for at this moment the gang of toughs, at least twenty in number, made a rush!

It was terrible odds, and while realizing that they could not hope to successfully withstand the onslaught of twenty burly roughs, the youths made up their minds to give a good account of themselves.

Ben, especially, was determined to give the fellows a surprise, and with a bound he leaped forward to meet the rushing gang, and then leaping into the air just at the right moment, kicked out with all the strength of an extremely powerful pair of legs. Each foot caught a man fairly in the chest, and hurled him back with such a force that he went down, carrying two or three with him, the fall of the seven or eight men making a terrible crash, mingled with which were the yells, howls and curses of the fallen men, who were as badly surprised as mortal men well could be.

This wonderful exhibition of Ben's so astonished the rest that they paused in their rush just long enough to give Ben time to leap back a few feet, spring into the air and kick out again, catching two men with his feet as before, and downing at least six more of the fellows with a crash. The first ones floored had struggled to their feet by this time, however, and were closing in on the youths in such a manner that Ben had no time or room in which to repeat his kicking feat. Both youths began striking out from the shoulder, however, and, being skilled boxers and expert in the art of self defence, managed by the aid of rapid foot work and by dodging, ducking and parrying to avoid the majority of the blows aimed at them by the infuriated toughs.

And, while doing this wonderful defensive work, they did some telling offensive work as well, for they struck out straight from the shoulder at every opportunity, landing usually, and with great effect, for both understood the art of throwing their weight into the blows and thus making them telling and powerful.

Especially was this the case with Ben, whose wonderful strength of arms gave him an advantage over Tom, and whenever he landed fairly on one of the toughs, the fellow, if not knocked down outright, usually withdrew to the rear for a few moments at least, to recuperate and wonder if the youth who had struck him was run by steam! In a couple of instances, where Ben got in terrific blows fairly on the point of the toughs' jaws, the fellows sank down limp and senseless, knocked out!

The youths were outnumbered too greatly, however, to hope to successfully fight their way through, and they would soon have been beaten down, but suddenly, just as they had been forced back to the wall, and were making what would have been the last stand, as, being unable to retire further, they would have been beaten down, a dozen youths with Markham and Spalding at their head, came rushing into the saloon!

"There Ben and Tom are!" cried Markham, his voice vibrating with excitement. "There are twenty against two! Go for the cowardly scoundrels!"

And go for them the youths did! It was like the rush of a cyclone, and for a few minutes there was as lively a melee there as had ever taken place in that saloon!

"Give it to them, fellows!" cried Ben. "Learn the scoundrels a lesson! They need it badly!"

Evidently the toughs were of a different notion; at any rate, they did not seem to care about taking a very long lesson the first time, for presently they began to give way, and then, making a sudden break, fled from the spot, disappearing through the front entrance with a rush, several of them getting wedged in the doorway, so eager were they to escape.

"Go it, you cowards!" cried Tom True scornfully. "You're beauties, you are!"

Then the barkeeper came out from behind the bar, and advanced to where the youths were standing.

"Wot do you fellers mean by comin' in here an' raisin' a row in dis fashion?" he cried, angrily. "You have drove all my customers out, an' broke up some of my chairs, an' I wants yer ter pay me fur ther damage, see?"

"Oh, you go to blazes!" growled Spalding, who's war blood was up. "What do you mean by letting twenty of your 'customers,' as you call the cowardly scoundrels, attack two persons as they did my friends, here?"

"Dat wuz nuttin' ter me," the fellow growled. "Gents wot raises er racket must git outer et themselves. I can't look arter 'em."

"But we didn't raise any racket, my dear sir," said Ben, quietly. "Those fellows attacked us, and we simply protected ourselves, that is all."

"That's right!" coincided Tom; "and if you want any damages paid, go to them. You won't get anything out of us!"

"Not on your life!"

"All you get out of us, you will be able to put in your eye!"

"Yes, and without being in danger of impeding your eyesight in the least!"

"Better get back behind the bar, old man!" said Little Punn, airily, gently caressing a lump on his forehead where the fist of a tough had landed. "You look more natural behind the bar, and, do you know, I really believe you would look better still behind bars? Fact!"

The barkeeper glared at Little Punn fiercely, but he might as well have tried to make an impression on the Sphinx. For cool insolence and unblushing effrontery it would have been hard to find the little chap's match, and he grinned back at the fellow in a way to make him angrier than ever.

bandying words, however, the barkeeper gave vent to an angry grunt, and took the little chap's advice, returning to his place behind the bar.

"I guess he isn't going to try to collect damages, after all, Ben!" said Little Punn; "so we may as well go."

"Did the fellow who stole the grip get away?" asked Markham eagerly.

"Yes," replied Ben. "He went into the rear room, here, and disappeared as mysteriously as if he had never really existed. Tom and I looked thoroughly, and we could find no place of exit."

"That is strange!" said Spalding.

"Yes, indeed. Well, come, fellows. I guess I will go and place the case in the hands of the police. Perhaps they may be able to recover the grip."

"I'm afraid they won't be able to do so," said Markham, dubiously, "I believe you would come nearer doing the trick yourself, Ben."

"Oh, I expect to put in the rest of the day," said Ben. "I shall track the grip thief down, if I can!"

"Good for you! We'll help you, Ben!"

"Come, then," said Ben, starting toward the entrance of the saloon. "We can do nothing more here."

The others followed, and as they stepped out upon the street a young fellow of about twenty years, who had been standing a couple of doorways further up, fell in behind the little crowd of youths and followed until the next street was reached. Then, when they had turned the corner, this young fellow brushed through the crowd and laid his hand on Ben's shoulder.

"May I have a word with you, young fellow?" he asked.

Ben turned quickly and gave the young fellow a searching glance. The youth was shabbily dressed and had a dissipated look, but there was something about him that told Ben that he was by no means wholly bad, and as Ben remembered having seen him in the saloon they had just left, he quickly decided to hear what the young fellow had to say.

"What do you wish to say?" he asked, stepping in close to the buildings, the rest following suit.

The young fellow hesitated for a few moments, and then said:

"I was in the saloon, back yonder, when you came in in chase of—of a fellow who had robbed you of a grip."

Ben nodded.

"I saw you," he said. "And, now," he continued in a kindly tone, laying his hands on the young fellow's shoulders and looking him straight in the eyes; "if you can give me information that will enable me to locate the grip and the

thief, and will do so, I will give you one hundred dollars!"

The face of the young man brightened.

"I both can and will do so," he said. "I followed you from the saloon just now, with that intention, and without expectation of reward; but, of course, if you see fit to reward me, if the information which I give you proves to be of value, I shall not object, as I assure you it has been a long time since I saw as much money as a hundred dollars!"

"That sum shall be yours if the information enables me to locate the fellow who stole the grip," said Ben. "Now, tell me all you know, quickly, for every minute may be of value."

"Very well, sir. In the first place, I will say that I know the fellow who robbed you of your grip. That is, I don't know his real name, but he is called 'The Weasel' by everybody, and he is a sneak thief by profession. It isn't often he tries anything bold, like this trick of to-day, and he wouldn't have tried that had he not been put up to it, and paid to do it."

Ben started.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Then someone hired him to do the trick! Do you know who that someone was?"

"Yes; that is, I know what he called himself. He goes by the name of McMurran, and there are four fellows who are always with——"

"McMaster!" burst from Tom True's lips.

"I doubt not that you are right, Tom," said Ben. "So this fellow, McMurran, hired 'The Weasel' to rob me of the grip? How do you know this?"

The young fellow flushed, and shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"Well," he said presently, "I know, because he tried to get me to do the trick!"

"Ah! And you refused?"

"Yes; I'm not any too good, I must admit, but I have never yet stolen anything, and I refused."

"Well, how do you know he hired 'The Weasel' to do the work?"

"Well, I was not present when they made the deal, but I was in the saloon, back yonder, when McMurran and his crowd, and 'The Weasel,' came out of the poker-room together, and I judged that was what they had been conferring about; then, to-day, when I saw 'The Weasel' come running into the saloon with a grip in his hand, I put two and two together, that is all."

"You are undoubtedly correct in your deductions," agreed Ben. "And now, I wish to ask if you know where 'The Weasel' went after he entered the poker-room, as you call it? I saw him enter that room, as plainly as I see you

now, but when I got in there, not half a minute later, he was gone, and I could find no place of exit—absolutely none!"

The young fellow smiled.

"There was a door," he said.

"Yes; but the door was nailed shut."

The young man smiled again.

"The lower part of the door was nailed shut," he said.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Ben, a suspicion of the truth dawning upon him.

"Have you ever seen barn doors that were in two pieces?" the youth asked.

"I have."

"Well, that door is made in the same manner. It is cut in two straight across the centre, at the middle panel, and is in fact, two doors. The lower door is nailed shut, but the upper one is easily opened by touching a hidden spring. 'The Weasel' went through there!"

"I knew there was a secret exit," said Ben; "but I could not find it."

"It would take a good eye, indeed, to detect the fact that the door is in two pieces. It fits so snugly that no one would notice the joint unless they knew of its existence."

The boys uttered exclamations of astonishment.

"Say, that's a pretty smooth scheme!"

"I should say so!"

"Who would have thought of such a thing!"

"I was looking for a secret panel in the wall, or a trap-door in the floor," said Ben. "I never thought of such a thing as that there might be a loose upper half of a door!"

"Well, that's just what there is," the young man said.

"And what is beyond—the alley?" asked Ben.

"Yes."

"Then he has escaped!" cried Ben, in disappointment.

"Not necessarily," the young man said. "I know where he was bound for with the grip!"

"You do! Then tell us, quick, and we will go there at once!"

"I couldn't tell you; but I can lead you to the place."

"That is what I wish you to do! Go ahead, and if we find those fellows, the hundred dollars shall be yours!"

The young man hesitated.

"I couldn't take all these fellows," he said. "We will have to go through a saloon where everybody is watched closely, and they must be considered all right from a rogue's standpoint or they won't be allowed to pass. I might get three of you through, but not more, and you will have to be rigged out as toughs, even then."

"That will be all right," said Ben eagerly. "Three of us will be enough for McMurran and his gang—for I take it that is where 'The Weasel' went with the grip!"

"Yes; McMurrin and his friends have a room over this saloon. There are a dozen or fifteen rooms, and at the rear is a gambling room. The only way to reach the upstairs is by going up from an inner stairway, and while each fellow who is all right is allowed to bring two or three fellows, he would not dare bring more."

"I understand. Tom, you and Markham will accompany me, and we'll see if we can't run this 'Weasel' to his hole. Is there a place near here where we can be rigged out as toughs?"

"There's a masquerade costumer just a few doors from here. He can fix you out, I think."

"All right. Show us there, at once. Boys, the rest of you may return to the hotel."

"All right," said Spalding. "You fellows want to be careful, however. Have you revolvers?"

"I have," replied Markham.

"Neither Tom nor myself has," said Ben; "but we will each get a revolver before we start."

"Do so," advised Spalding. "You don't know what you may strike before you get back from this trip."

At the door of the costumer's, Ben, Tom and Markham parted from the others, entering with the young fellow who was to guide them in their trip to find the grip, while the others set out for the hotel.

Ben told the costumer what he wanted, and the man got out three rough suits such as toughs would be supposed to wear.

These the youths donned, after doffing their own neatly-fitting suits, and then, getting out his paints, the costumer, who was quite an artist, proceeded to touch the faces of the youths up in a deft manner, and in an incredibly short space of time had the three youths converted into three typical toughs of the kind that infest the worst quarters of all large cities.

This done, Ben turned to the young man.

"We are ready," he said. "Lead on; we will follow."

CHAPTER IX.

THE RECOVERY OF THE GRIP.

The young man led the way from the place, and down the street a few doors, stopping in front of a hardware store.

"You can get revolvers in here," he said.

"We had better get them, too, Ben," said Tom. "We might need them badly before we get through with this affair."

"So we might," assented Ben. "Come," and he entered, followed by the others.

Two revolvers and a box of cartridges were purchased, and then, after having loaded the weapons, and pocketed them, the little party went out upon the street.

Then the young man, who gave his name as Washburn, took the lead, and for half an hour he walked, threading his way through the streets, and arriving, finally, at a street only a short distance from the water front, the waters of the bay being visible, the ends of the streets seeming to run into the water.

Then Washburn paused, and, turning to the youths, said:

"We are almost there. Now, I must caution you to say as little as possible, and act as nearly like you were familiar with your surroundings as you can."

"Very well," replied Ben. "You may depend upon us."

"All right; come," and Washburn led the way down the street to a saloon at about the middle of the block.

The young fellow paused a single instant, as if hesitating, and then led the way into the saloon, Ben, Tom and Markham following closely.

They found themselves in just such a place as the saloon into which Ben had chased the fellow who stole the grip, and there were twenty to twenty-five men there, mostly tough-looking fellows, who were evidently criminals.

Many of them knew Washburn, and nodded or spoke to him, and eyed his companions closely as the four walked down the length of the saloon.

"Who are dey, Washy?" asked one big, burly fellow, who looked as if he might be the "bouncer" of the establishment, and he nodded toward Ben, Tom and Markham.

"Friends of mine from over the range, Billings," Washburn replied. "They're all right. We're going upstairs."

"All right," Billings replied, and Washburn led the way to and up a flight of stairs at the extreme end of the room.

On reaching the landing, the young man turned and led the way along a hall until they came to another hall, extending at right angles with this one. Here Washburn paused, and pointing to the third door on the right hand side, said in a whisper:

"That is the room occupied by McMurrin and his gang. It is a large room, and fronts on the street. Let's slip to the door and see if we can hear anybody inside."

Ben nodded assent, and the four stole forward on their tiptoes, making almost no noise at all, and paused at the door. Washburn stepped to one side and motioned to Ben to listen at the keyhole, and stopping, Ben placed his ear there.

Immediately he heard the sound of voices, and he recognized the voice of McMaster, his old enemy of Raymond

Academy and since. There were other voices, one of which was that of Alford, he was sure, and presently he heard Wilson's voice, and then a strange voice, which, he had no doubt, belonged to 'The Weasel,' the scoundrel who had stolen the grip.

Ben listened eagerly, and soon got the run of the conversation going on within the room. Evidently the scoundrels were trying to get the grip open, and were being baffled by its being lined with a network of steel links, meshed together. The framework, where the grip opened and closed, was of steel, and, being locked by a secret spring, and the framework being so strong it could not be pried or burst open, the half-dozen rogues were stumped; they did not know what to do.

"Of all the grips I ever saw, this one takes the cake!" Ben heard McMaster growl. "Who but Ben Bright would ever have thought of getting such a thing, anyway?"

"So the feller's name is Bright, eh?" the strange voice said. "Well, I should say this heer wuz a purty bright idee. Et hain't a very pleasant wun fur us, though."

"I should say not! Curse the luck, anyhow! How in the world are we to get the thing open? Blow it open with dynamite?"

"No; we can't do nothin' like that," the strange voice replied. "Ther on'y thing I kin think uv is thet we might git a pair uv stout shears like tinnerns use, an' cut ther links with em."

"I don't believe they can be cut," responded the voice of McMaster. "These links are made of chilled steel, and no ordinary shears would cut them."

"What is to be done, then?" asked the voice of Alford.

"I give it up!" growled McMaster.

"Send for Ben Bright, and have him open the grip!" suggested Wilson, with an attempt at being facetious.

Now it happened that Ben had placed his hand on the doorknob while listening at the keyhole, and almost mechanically had turned the knob, and just as Wheeler made his would-be facetious remark, Ben saw the door open slightly in response to his push and realized that the door was unlocked. As Wilson's words fell upon his hearing a sudden impulse came to the youth, and, shoving the door wide open with a crash, he bounded into the room, and, leveling his revolver at the well-nigh paralyzed inmates, cried:

"Ben Bright is here, and will take that grip, if you please! Hands up, you fellows!"

Into the room close upon Ben's heels bounded Tom and Markham, also with leveled revolvers, and suddenly coming to a realization of what had happened, McMaster gave vent to a wild cry of rage, disappointment and fear and

bounded through a doorway which connected with an adjoining room, the other five bounding after him like hares!

Of course, Ben and his companions could have shot at the fellows, and could have brought one or two of them down, but they did not feel justified in doing it; in truth, they were youths who would have fired upon an enemy only to save their own lives, and not then, unless it was absolutely necessary. So they simply leaped forward and tried the door, the last one of the six to go through having closed it, and they found it was locked.

On making this discovery, they turned away from the door, just as Washburn leaped into the room out of the hall, and closed and locked the door.

"They're in the hall and making for downstairs!" he said, hurriedly. "They'll rouse the crowd down below, and the whole gang'll be up in a minute! We must get out of here through the window, if possible! Grab your grip, and come on!"

Then Washburn ran to the window, and raising it looked out.

"We can get out on the awning and jump to the street!" he cried. "It's our only chance, and must be done quickly! Come!" and he clambered quickly out upon the awning.

Ben seized the grip, which had been left sitting on the table by McMaster when he fled, and followed Washburn, Tom and Markham coming close behind, and as Markham climbed through the window, he heard the sound of hurried footsteps in the hall outside the door.

"Down you go, quickly, fellows!" he cried. "I hear them coming!" and he slid recklessly down the slanting awning and leaped to the street below at a bound.

Washburn had reached the street ahead of Markham, and Tom True and Ben were only a moment or so behind Markham, and as a crash sounded upstairs, made by the bursting down of the door, the four turned and ran up the street like greyhounds, watched in amazement by a hundred pairs of eyes.

At this instant the front door of the saloon came open, and out poured a dozen toughs.

"Yonder de cusses go!" one cried, pointing toward the four fleeing youths. "Arter 'em, fellers! McMurrans set's er hundred dollars ter ther feller ez brings thet grip back!"

And "arter 'em" the "fellers" did go, but the four were all good runners, and having a strong incentive to not be caught, they put all their strength into their efforts, and ran as if their lives depended on the issue of the race.

Once some fellows tried to block their advance, but Ben, Tom and Markham knocked the men right and left, and the four continued on in triumph.

On they went, one, two, three blocks, the shouting toughs behind them; but gradually these fellows were distanced, and after four or five blocks had been traversed they were lost sight of altogether.

Feeling safe, now, the four slackened their speed to a walk, and walked rapidly under the guidance of Washburn, for he knew the way, while they did not, this being the first time Ben, Tom and Markham had ever been in San Francisco.

"Phew, but that was close work!" said Tom True. "That crowd came very near grabbing us, I tell you!"

"That's right," assented Markham. "We just got out of that place in the nick of time."

"That was a bad crowd, too!" said Washburn. "There are lots of those fellows who would just as lief kill a man as not."

"I judged so by the looks of them," assented Ben. "Well, they can't catch us now."

"No; we're clear of them."

"Jove! but you did scare those six fellows, though!" exclaimed Washburn, with a smile. "I never saw a gang get such a move on itself as that one did!"

"They were a bit frightened!" smiled Markham.

"The five of them know Ben, here, of old, and are as afraid of him as any persons could possibly be of anything."

"They were your old enemies, then, after all?" Washburn asked.

"Yes," replied Ben. "The fellow who called himself McMurrin, is really McMaster, and the four are cronies of his. Three months ago we were all going to school together in Bronxton, New York, but the academy burned down, throwing us out, and while I and a number of my school-mates went on the road with the play, 'Three Chums,' McMaster and his cronies became gamblers and outcasts."

"McMaster burned the academy down, and tried to lay the crime on Ben," explained Tom.

"He must be a thorough scoundrel, sure enough!" said Washburn. And then he added:

"So you're from New York, eh? I'm a New Yorker, myself."

"Is that so?" remarked Ben, with an interested air. "What place are you from?"

"Utica."

"Ah! A very nice town," said Ben. "I have been there often—have played more than one hot game of football there. My home is in Syracuse, and I played on the football and baseball teams two seasons. How long since you left Utica?"

"Four years. I ran away from home when I was sixteen. It is the same old story. I thought I knew more than my

father, and one day when he tried to correct me I rebelled and skipped out. I was sorry for it mighty quick, but was too proud to go back, and kept drifting westward, farther and farther away, until a year ago I fetched up in San Francisco, and I've been here ever since."

Ben laid a hand on Washburn's shoulder as they walked along, and asked, in a low, earnest voice:

"Was your mother alive when you left home, my boy?"

The young man started, and paled slightly. His lips quivered and there was the suspicion of tears in his eyes as he replied:

"Yes; my mother was alive—and she was a good mother, too, as good as any boy ever need want!"

"And you have written to your mother often, have you not?"

The young man flushed guiltily.

"No;" he answered, shamefacedly; "I have never written a word home. They don't know whether I am alive or dead."

"And your mother breaking her heart for you all these long years!" said Ben, an almost stern expression on his face and in his tone. My boy, how could you be so cruel? Do you know what a mother's love is, Washburn? There is nothing else like it—nothing to compare with it, my boy, and I am going to ask you, to beseech you to write to her at once, or better still, go home to her, Washburn! Make your mother happy again before it is too late—if it is not already too late!"

Ben spoke feelingly, earnestly, and as he finished the young man turned paler still, and gave a gasp.

"Oh, say!" he murmured, tremblingly; "do you think—could it be possible that my mother is—is—no longer alive?"

"Such a thing is possible, though for your sake I hope not, Washburn," said Ben gently. "I wish you would say you will go home, my boy!"

"I'd go in a minute, if I had the money!" the young fellow said falteringly. "Oh, I would like to see my mother again! And my father, too! I would like to see him, and ask his forgiveness for my hastiness. He was a good man, and a just one, but very strict. If I had done as he wished me to, however, I should be a respectable citizen of Utica, N. Y., instead of a reckless young scapegoat in San Francisco! I see it all very plainly now when it is too late!"

"But it is not too late," said Ben earnestly. "Always remember, Washburn, that it is never too late to change one's ways for the better. And as for the money, I owe you a hundred dollars which I shall pay as soon as we reach the costumer's, and I wish you would say you will use that money to pay your way back home!" Washburn!"

The young man turned and looked Ben in the eyes, a happy, determined light in his own.

"I will do it!" he said, earnestly. "I will take this evening's train out of San Francisco! I am going home, and I am going to try to be a respectable citizen. If I succeed, I shall owe it to you, Ben Bright!"

"No, you will owe it to your own strength of character. Well, I am glad you have so decided, Washburn, and I hope you will find your parents alive and well."

"I hope so!" fervently.

On reaching the costumer's, Ben, Tom and Markham washed off their make-ups, doffed the old clothes, donned their own, and then Ben gave Washburn two one hundred-dollar bills.

"Go and fit yourself out with new clothes, then take the first train for home, Washburn," he said.

The young fellow thanked Ben, earnestly and feelingly for the gift of the money, and promised to do as the youth asked.

Then, bidding Washburn good-by, Ben, with the recovered grip in his hand, and with Tom on one side and

Markham on the other to guard against another possible attempt on the part of a McMaster emissary at stealing the grip, made his way toward the hotel.

THE END.

The next number (24) of "Three Chums" will contain "THREE CHUMS' NERVE; OR, PLAYING AT THE GOLDEN GATE," by Harry Moore.

SPECIAL NOTICE—All back numbers of this weekly are always in print. If you cannot obtain them from any newsdealer, send the price in money or postage stamps, by mail, to

FRANK TOUSEY, Publisher,
24 Union Square, New York City,
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.....1900.

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Dear Sir:

Enclosed find cents for which please send me:

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- " " PLUCK AND LUCK "
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★ P R A I S E ! ★

Alexandria, Ont., Feb. 21, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read your "Three Chums" for a long while, and I find it good. Will you kindly tell me if it is a true story? Yours very truly, Albert Lougie.

We are glad that you like it. Yes, it is a true story. That is what makes it so interesting.

Pittsburg, Feb. 20, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read "Three Chums" from the first to the last, and think it is first-class, and I have got them all put away to keep as long as I can. I am waiting for the next one to come. I think I will read them as long as I can. Yours truly, Harry Eagan.

We hope you will keep them all so as to read them over from time to time. They won't suffer from being read often.

Aurora, Mo., Feb. 26, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read "Three Chums" from No. 1, having just finished No. 16. I am much pleased to know that there is such a perfect story writer as Mr. Moore. I am ever so glad that Ben chained his money grip to the bed-post the last night of his performance in St. Louis. Ben has a splendid company. First, I like Ben himself; next Tom, then Miss Dare. I am proud to know of their being true to each other—"One for all and all for one." Ben is a noble and true-hearted youth. Tom is quick-tempered, although he is brave, noble and wise. Hoping that Ben, Tom and Miss Dare will score a success on this trip, and be unharmed by McMaster, I remain, a constant reader of "Three Chums." Yours truly, L. D. Mace.

Thanks for pleasant, chatty letter. Follow the fortunes of the "Chums" and you will always be pleased. Mr. Moore sends his compliments. Thanks for kind wishes.

Elenor, O., Feb. 14, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read "Three Chums" No. 1, and think it is as nice and interesting a story as I ever read, and I intend to read the rest of them. Yours truly, Imo E. Hill.

Thanks. We hope that you will. They are all just as interesting as the first.

Highland, Ill., Feb. 17, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—Seeing no praise coming on this neck of the woods, I thought I would write a little praise for "Three Chums," which is simply excellent. What name of Cogswell? Will Ben ever get rid of McMaster? Please answer in next "Three Chums." As ever, your reader, William Scott.

"Simply excellent" is all right. You will hear of them again. Keep your eye on Ben Bright.

Virden, Ill., Feb. 21, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read all the copies of the "Three Chums." They are the best. I have also read a good many books of that sort, and they do not come up to the limit of "Three Chums." I hope the writer will continue to write them, because they are so interesting. I am always waiting for the next one to come. C. H. Reagard.

Thanks. "Three Chums" means to go on to the limit of time. Mr. Moore continues to write for us indefinitely.

Binghamton, N. Y., Feb. 15, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read the beginning of the stories of "Three Chums," and think it is a great story for an American boy. Ben is all right, and so is Tom True. I hope they will always stay together. I hope the "Three Chums" will get good houses wherever they go. Ben ought to meet Cogswell again. McMaster is a coward and Ben ought to despise him as Tom does. I hope Ben and all the company will start a ball team in the spring. Ben would make a fine pitcher, with Dorothy and Mamie for mascots. Hoping Mr. Moore will be successful with this great weekly, I remain, yours truly, William Bentley, 6 Kennedy st.

Thanks. Wait till the baseball season opens and you will see something. The show is a success.

Marionville, Mo., Feb. 18, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I am a reader of "Three Chums," and have every one of them so far published. I am going to have them bound. Of Ben's friends I like Heber Markham best, although all of them are all right. I hope to see Ben and his friends back at school, also Dorothy and Mamie. Would also like to see Dan Denny and Patsy Dooley go to school. Long life and success to Mr. Moore, Mr. Tousey and "Three Chums." I remain, a constant reader, Byron Russell Coleman.

Thanks. They all return the compliment. You will hear a lot of interesting things about Ben and his friends if you continue to read "Three Chums."

Philadelphia, Pa., Feb. 19, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I thought I would write you a few lines to let you know that I am reading "Three Chums." I like it very much. It is very interesting. I can't praise "Three Chums" any more. I have read every number so far except one. I would like to know if you would send me No. 2? Will you please let me know? L. Morgan, 614 N. Fifth st.

You can obtain back numbers of "Three Chums" from us if your newsdealer happens to be out of them at five cents each. Thanks for good opinion of "Three Chums."

Danvers, Mass., Feb. 22, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I send you my praise of "Three Chums." It is the best book for a nickel I ever read, and I have read them from No. 1 up to the present number, and I hope that Ben Bright will conquer Frank McMaster in the end, and I hope he will go back to Raymond Academy in the spring and run his show in the fall. Long life to Mr. Moore and "Three Chums." Yours, Rollin H. Perley.

You might even have said "the best for any money." for we try to make it so. Follow Ben's fortunes and you will read of many interesting adventures. Mr. Moore sends thanks.

Toronto, Feb. 24, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read "Three Chums" weekly ever since its first appearance, and I wish to state that I believe it to be the best paper for boys and girls that I have ever read. "Three Chums" are surely model characters. With my best regards to Mr. Moore, I remain, your steady reader, Mannie Bachrack.

Many thanks. Mr. Moore is greatly pleased. So are the "Chums."

St. Thomas, Ont., Feb. 25, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have just finished reading No. 16 of "Three Chums," and I must say it was simply great, and I cannot find words to express my admiration for this wonderful weekly. Mr. Moore is certainly a great author to be able to write such stories as it contains, and as long as it is published I shall continue to read it. I work all night, and I pass away many an interesting hour perusing the adventures of Ben Bright and his staunch friends. I hope Ben and his company will pass through Canada before they get back to New York. Wishing all success to "Three Chums," Mr. Moore and the publisher, I remain, W. H. D.

You seem to have found some very pleasant words to say in praise of "Three Chums." Mr. Moore and the publisher return thanks.

Erie, Pa., Feb. 26, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have just finished reading No. 16 of "Three Chums," and I must say it is the best book published. I like to read about Ben Bright and Tom True. Dorothy Dare is, in plain words, a "peach," and Little Punnie is a poet and don't know it. I will do all I can to help "Three Chums." I hope that Ben Bright and McMaster will meet, and that Ben can get one good crack at him, which will give him enough. I will close, hoping that "Three Chums" never ends. I can scarcely wait for the next number. I remain, yours sincerely, George Ed Scharer, 726 E. 12th st.

Thanks for kind words, and for promise to help "Three Chums." Letters like yours always help us. "Three Chums" is here for good.

Philadelphia, Pa., Feb. 25, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have just finished No. 16 of "Three Chums," and find that they grow more interesting as they go along. Ben, Tom and Miss Dare are all right. I nearly die laughing at Patsy Dooley, Rhyme, Little Punn and Blues Brown. Wishing them all a long life, with my regards to Mr. Moore, as he is a master hand at writing stories, I am, yours very truly, Fred Seither.

Many thanks. Punn and the rest are funny fellows. They and Mr. Moore return the compliment.

Fall River, Mass., Feb. 28, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—I have read "Three Chums" from No. 1 to No. 16, and will read it every week. My friends also read it, and think it is the best weekly they ever read. Mr. Moore is a good hand at writing stories for boys. Wishing "Three Chums" a successful run, I remain, yours truly, Alfred Walker, 283 Bedford st.

Thanks for good opinion from yourself and friends. Mr. Moore sends kind regards.

Springfield, Mass., Feb. 28, 1900.

Mr. Frank Tousey—

Dear Sir:—As I have read upward of one thousand novels, I consider myself a good judge, and regard "Three Chums" as the king of novels. I would like very much to have a column for club chats in your paper, as I think that forming clubs will increase the circulation of "Three Chums." Yours, T. Sullivan.

If you have read so many you certainly ought to know what is good. Your suggestion is under consideration.

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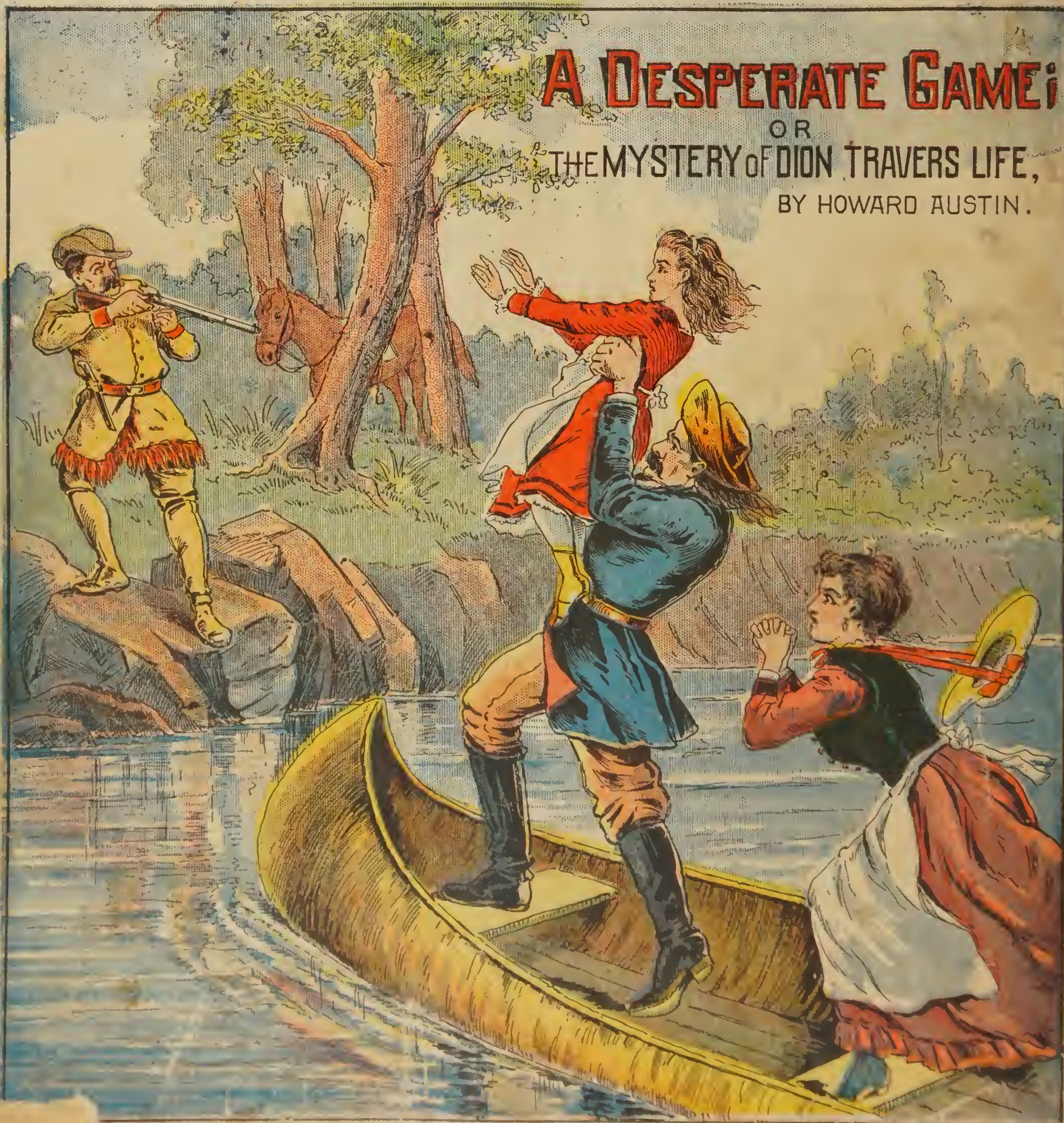
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